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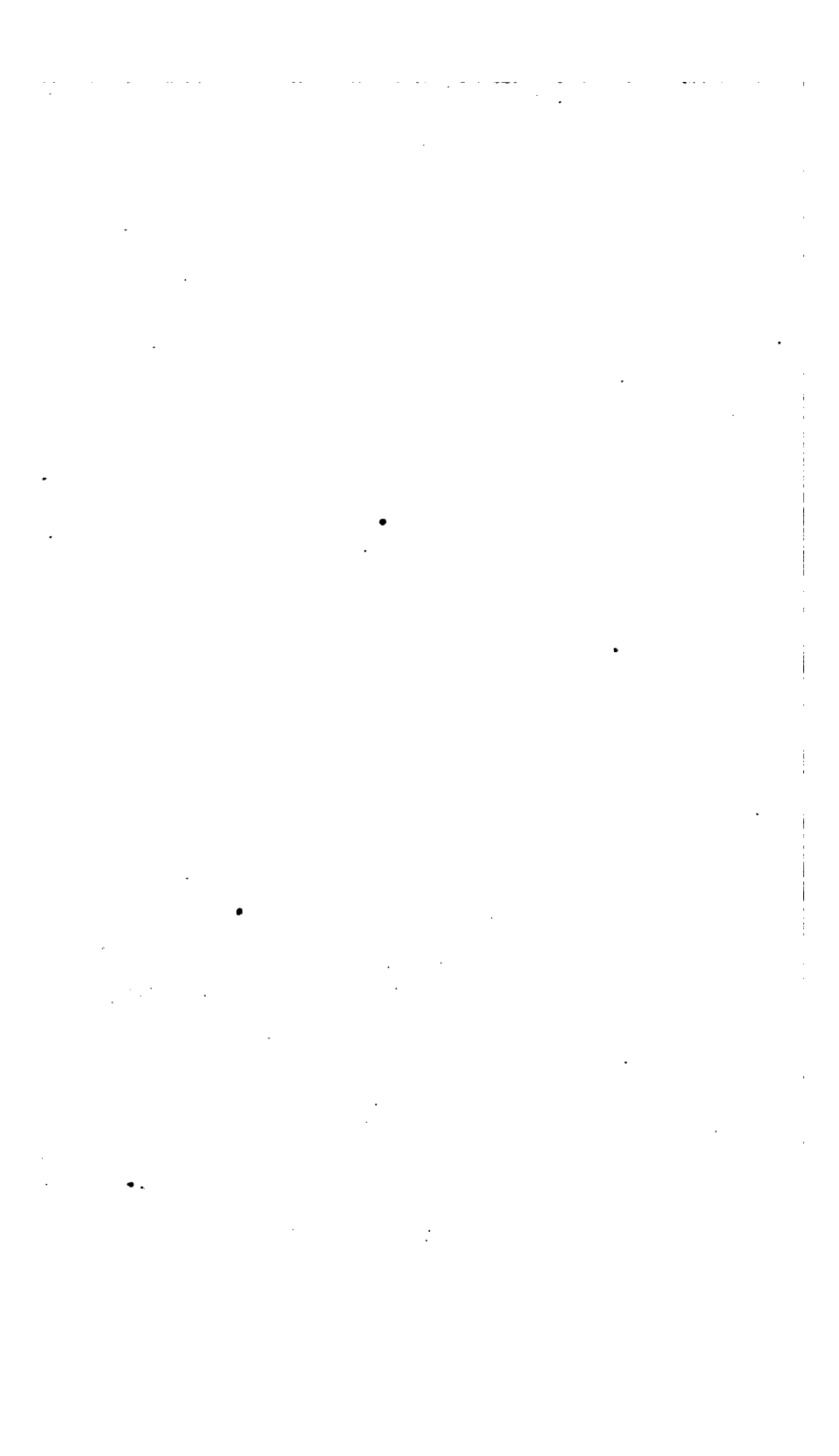
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THE OLD HALL;

OR,

OUR HEARTH AND HOMESTEAD.

BY

JOHN MILLS,

**AUTHOR OF "THE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN," "THE STAGE COACH,
OR THE ROAD OF LIFE," "THE ENGLISH FIRESIDE,"
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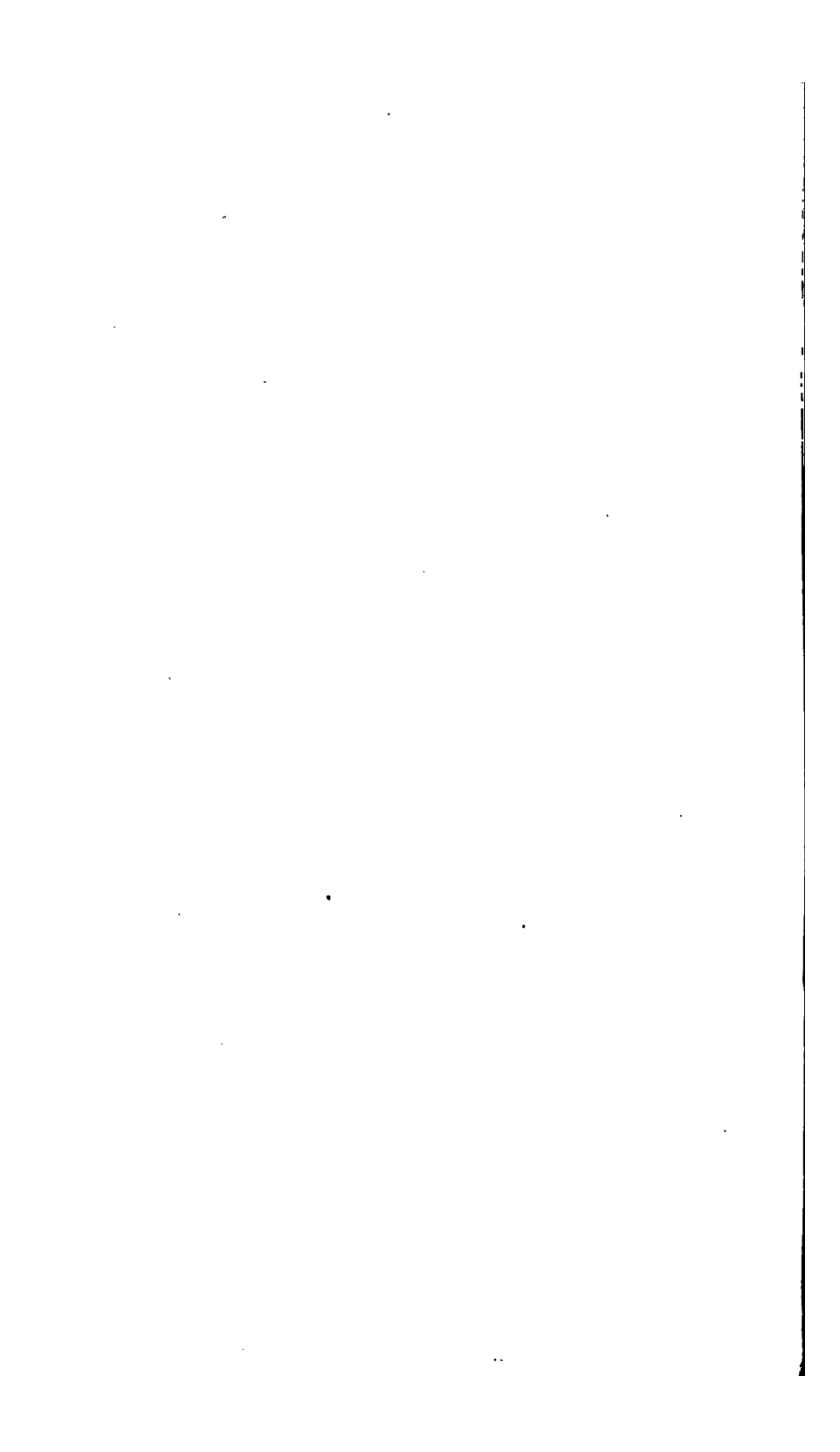
IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I. .



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1845.



PREFACE.

No one can set less store than the writer on the slender thread by which the desultory scenes contained in these volumes are strung together. In justice to himself, however, and his gentle readers, he is desirous of not being accused of failing in that which, in fact, he never contemplated accomplishing. His object has not been to attempt the part of a monitor, by searching the annals of crime and vice, or the long list of the victims of passion and immorality, and thereby developing characters perhaps more baneful in being held up as examples, than if they had been permitted to sink into forgetfulness. The aim has been simply to depicture, with the faithfulness which a long experience may have rendered capable, those invigorating scenes connected with our

national sports, universally indulged in by all classes of society in some way or other.

Health, manly strength, buoyancy of spirits, courage, generosity, hospitality, and, indeed, most of the best feelings and impulses of our nature, attend these recreations; and so long as they continue to be springs and sources productive of good, so long may the gentlemen of England render them the distinguishing feature of their country.

If, however, the writer has not "pointed a moral to adorn his tale," he thinks he may safely claim this *negative* virtue—that should no one close the book a wiser or a better man, still no one can close it and be the worse.

J. M.

October 28th, 1845.

THE OLD HALL;

OR,

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CHAPTER I

"It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say, that ever 'gainst the season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long :
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad ;
The nights are wholesome : then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

A RIGHT merry time is Christmas ! Then the
mistletoe hangs from the beam, and red-berried
holly is stuck in nook and cranny, and yule logs
blaze on the hearth, and hearts are light and

eyes are bright, and all things tend to mirth and jollity. The "roast beef of old England" smokes on the spit, and plum-puddings of gigantic calibre steam in roaring, hissing boilers; and huge butts of ripe old ale are tapped, and bowls of sweet-smelling punch are brewed; and laughing, rollicking hospitality throws his door back upon its hinge, and welcomes the crowd with hearty grasps and glowing greetings. A right merry time is Christmas! Then quaint ballads, songs, and ditties are rummaged from the store of memory, and the old croon to themselves the rhymes they learned in lisping infancy. Ay, and they snap their fingers to the tune, and cut a step or two, and laugh as they are reminded of fun and frolic long since passed away. Egad! it warms their lazy blood, too, and makes it skip, for the nonce, nimbly through their veins to see plump, rosy-cheeked lasses, dragged beneath the Druidical branch, and kisses loud and long smacked upon their cherry lips, willing for the office, and yet reluctantly

consenting. A right merry time is Christmas ! Books and satchels are consigned to dusty shelves, and the spider may spin his film, 'mid classic lore, without endangering the mesh withal, or risk of life or limb. "Hurrah for home ! the good, dear old home !" Such is the cry from youthful tongues, echoed from young, glad hearts, and in it is the joyous music of the loving and beloved.

Home ! Yes, "while yet a nook is left where English minds and manners may be found, hearts shall be constrained to love it." Home ! let it be never so humble, still finds a whispered echo in the humblest heart. Like as the tear of the penitent gains the readiest road to Heaven, and is there treasured as the most grateful offering ; so the thought of home forms the priceless offering to the shrine of mortal adoration. The good and the happy—those on whom the hand of misfortune has so lightly rested that the gaunt and lank necessities and cares of others sound but as tales to fan their

sympathy—ever turn to the remembrance of “the old house at home,” with smiles and thoughts of merry, gladsome tales of Christmas revels, and of harvest homes, and the wedding-days of village lad and lassie; and, should the thought be mingled with regret that the scenes and actors in them may have passed, and passed away for ever, still it is blended with the recalling of those hours when joy floated above joy, and life was, indeed, but a laughing holyday.

In a wide and lofty room—it had once been a banquet hall for steel-clad knights and barons—with huge black rafters stretching across the roof, and its walls flanked with polished panels of oak, a motley company of merry folks were assembled. A pile of faggots blazed in the yawning chasm of the hearth, and threw a fitful gleam of light to the farthest corner of the room, while a lamp of antique handicraft flared brightly from the centre of the middle beam, and made the holly, ivy, and mistletoe, scat-

tered in profusion around, look as fresh and green as the leaf of the hawthorn in early spring. Upon a broad and long table, placed against the wall opposite the chimney corner, and whose surface was glossy alone from the friction of time, flagons of foaming ale, and bowls filled with potent odoriferous mixtures, bearing various titles, and yet each claiming an equal degree of merit, and deep jorums of grog, and jugs of cider, were placed in long-continued rows. It was a fine sight, a very fine sight, indeed, to look at that merry crew toasting, and pledging, and draining their cups, and exchanging sentiments, and doing anything and everything for "an excuse for the glass." Then with what spirit the reel and country-dance were joined in again; and, if the capers were not from light fantastic toes, still they were from as light-hearted a set as ever shuffled upon toe or heel. And the village fiddler, too—a sadly dissipated fellow is that village fiddler; he is to be found at every wedding, revel,

and merry-making, and the bright pink tip of his nose betrays the fondness he entertains for drinks stronger than are dipped from moss-covered buckets, or caught from rippling brooks—adds fresh rosin to his bow, and scrapes with such enlivened power to his elbow, that sparks of fire, as well as notes of inspiration, seem to fly from the strings, until the very chairs, settles, and tables, join in the jig.

Ay, Christmas was not forgotten or neglected at the Range—as the Manor-house was called—nor had it been within the recollection of the oldest living, and, as they would say, their fathers said the like thing when they were little children, and, for any proof to the contrary, such had been the tale for generations now mingled and mingling with the dust.

“Old friends, old books, old wine, old customs, and old wood to burn,” was the standing toast at the Range; and, as the Squire used to rise with his beaming, ruddy face, and clear glistening eyes, to give his favourite zest to the

bumper, seldom, if ever, was there seen a finer "old English gentleman." His hair, thinly sprinkled upon his brow, was so white that the slight shake of powder blended with it, in no way heightened its bleached hue; and the scrupulous care with which the small pig-tail gathered into shape, and evenly bound with black riband, formed the very *beau-ideal* of one of those now obsolete appurtenances to a man of fashion. The cambric neckcloth, too, was folded and tied without a wrinkle; and, if it bore a somewhat stiff appearance, and of necessity led the observer to think of the consistency of starch, still its very formality gave an air which a flabby, ill-conditional cravat never yet had coupled with it. Then there was the long buff waistcoat, of almost interminable length, and the wide-skirted blue coat, with buttons of the very brightest polish, and the drab "shorts," which, when the gaiter was off, exhibited the very model, of calf and ankle encased in fine ribbed-silk stockings. Such was

the costume of the Squire of the Range, and such had been—if those rows of chubby-faced portraits in the corridor were authentic evidence—the outward semblance of many a former proprietor. It is true, that by far the greater number of them were in more antique costumes. Flowing wigs, lace, ruffles, velvet, long waists, short waists, there were in abundance; but the fresher paintings in the collection were so much like the present occupier, that they would have passed exceedingly well for pictures taken of him at various stages of his life.

And what an old place the Range was! Great gable ends jutted out here and there, bound and laid in with oak; and irons bars were screwed and riveted together, at equal distances, throughout the massive walls, as if in defiance of the crumbling hand of time, and the ravages of tempests and the storms of ages. A dried fosse surrounded the building, on the banks of which many a garden flower grew, and tall elms now towered from the very bed; convincing proof

that it must have been a long time ago since it had been applied for the purposes of defence, although the barbed head of an arrow deeply buried in the oaken sill of a casement, and which now presented a convenient ledge for a swallow to build her nest upon, gave token of the troublesome times which had passed since the erection of the ancient house. In the centre was a stone porch, and from a deep groove cut in the coping-stone, and the rusty sockets of a shot-bolt, it was clear that a portcullis had once been suspended above it as further means of protection. Thick, sturdy limbs of ivy clung in every direction about the walls and stretched themselves far and wide, even to the roof and about the tall and crooked chimneys, which were so twined and twisted in their form that even the smoke appeared to struggle with difficulty through them. But it did come in great, thick, black masses ; for it would, indeed, have been a subject for wonderment if the chimneys of the Range ceased to disgorge their sooty

vomit when winter drew friends together at its fireside. Then, surrounding the mossy and gray building, giant oaks reared and stretched their stalwart limbs; and if a few of the trunks of capacious girth had been scooped by age and now afforded hollow homes for a few cozy owls to pass their leisure hours in, yet they bore as fresh and as green leaves, and flapped and fanned them in the summer wind as cheerily, and defied the angry winter blast as bravely, as their more sound and solid companions. Clumps, too, of thick dark firs were dotted here and there about the broad and extensive park adjoining; and the ringdove cooed at morn and eve among the branches without disturbing the antlered stag crouched in his lair at the roots.

As had been his custom at each succeeding Christmas, the Squire assembled his friends, neighbours, tenants, servants, and dependants together in the great hall, and they were now in the very zenith of their revel. The night—and a bright moonlight and frosty one it was—

had been well dipped into, and yet the laugh was as loud and the joke as spirited as at a much earlier hour. On went the dance and round passed the glass, and the song echoed among the dusty cobwebbed rafters until they rang again.

"That's right, my lads and lasses," cried the Squire, as he sat in a quaintly-carved arm chair, a delighted spectator of the scene. "That's right," he repeated; and seeing the hilarity of the company increase with the cheer, he rubbed his hands together briskly, and drained a bumper with a silent hope that every one present might be there when Christmas came again.

"Come, come, Harry Lawrence," said a companion, close to the Squire's right hand, and giving him a friendly nudge with his elbow, "what a boy you are, to toss off a glass by yourself, to be sure. If at a loss, could'nt ye have hob-an'-nobbed with me?"

And then the Squire tried to assume a particularly knowing look, and chuckled an inward laugh to himself, and after two or three very

effective shakes of the head, observed, that "He knew what was what; and if twice three *didn't* make six, three times two *did*."

Oh, yes! the Squire was quite a wag in his way.

The party addressing him thus familiarly was a little man, who appeared to have been designed to personify Laughter. Every feature that he possessed, either directly or sympathetically, was in a constant state of grinning; and for this peculiar office—as in all others designed by Nature's faultless chisel—he was especially well adapted. His head was quite bereft of hair, save a thin scanty ridge sprouting round the back part of it, not dissimilar in hue and texture to a stripe of gray rabbit's skin. His face was as round as a pippin, and quite as red as a fresh-blown poppy; and it was remarked that the shades never varied, except when a keen, nipping wind had been pelting it for some hours, and then it deepened to the purple colour of a very ripe mulberry. His mouth, from

continued stretching and being unintermittingly screwed up at the angles, was large, and fully developed from exercise, rather than from the natural size of that most useful organ, and the feature immediately surmounting it was the funniest little shapeless snub of a nose that ever was abused by snuff or any other villanous compound. Some said that his eyes were blue, others, black, and others maintained they were brown, green, hazel; and all sorts of opinions were asserted upon this knotty point; but, since they were never seen, from being buried and hidden from mortal gaze in the overwhelming mound of cheek, which all but closed over them, it must remain a mystery never to be solved. In figure he bore a striking resemblance to a beer barrel raised on a couple of hat-pegs; his body was so peculiarly tubby and circular. In truth, he was a man, taking him all in all, not likely to be met with in the by-paths of the world with the same frequency that blackberries may be found upon the hedgerows in yellow

autumn. But, if his outward bearing was strange and rare to behold, well would it be for the happiness of earthly mortals that the inward man and secret germs of his kind, good, benevolent, and cheerful little heart, were as common in the human breast as daisies pied in the meadows in spring. Then would envy, and slander, and all uncharitableness become rare entries in that huge volume—the records of our sins, and sighs, and tears, change to loving-laughter joy and unalloyed happiness ; but it is not to be so. There are few, very few John Hardys in this part and parcel of the solar system, whatever there may be in the remaining divisions.

And yet, John Hardy was a mysterious man, with all his admitted worth and proverbial goodness. He had been the Squire's college chum ; and accepting an invitation to pay him a visit, above thirty years ago, he remained from that day to the present, without the remotest idea of changing his quarters. It should be stated,

however, that if, from the hour of his entering the manor-house to this, he had ventured to express an intention of quitting them, the probability is, that the Squire might have feared that his brain began to wander, and at once have applied positive coercion, by locking him up in the wine or the coal-cellar. Be this as it may, John Hardy never caused him the unpleasant necessity of such a measure against the freedom of his person. A welcome bade him come; and the respective inclinations of the host and his own, formed the bird-lime of his stay. There was nothing mysterious in this; but certain other matters, trifling in themselves, and yet of weight in the scale of social existence, were special puzzles to the brains of his acquaintance. Allusions to "a little freehold," and "a small sum in the funds," with "a few ground-rents," often were subjects of discussion; for no one could learn where the property was situate, or in what particular securities the money was invested. But the riddle of the

greatest magnitude consisted in John's not unfrequent reference to "his place in Town!!" It was a sweeping form of speaking of a local habitation; but such was the way of his describing this indefinite residence. Not a creature could discover whether it was situate in a park, street, square, crescent, lane, or alley; for this "place in Town" was never more particularly described; and when closely questioned as to its particular situation by any one who could take upon himself the liberty, John would invariably dive his fingers among the depths of his neck-cloth, and, casting a fixed look at the ceiling immediately above his head, reply that "he had private reasons for withholding the required information." Then, perhaps, the Squire would rejoin by telling John that "he was a sly dog, and he shouldn't wonder if there was a lady in the case." But if there was she must have been by no means an intimate acquaintance; as they had not met during John's visit to the manor-house, and that

was five years ago this very Christmas. That John Hardy possessed an income, from some source or other, there can be no doubt, or how could he have been so generous in his distributions of rewards and prizes? But that he had "a place in Town" is very questionable. Then what could have been his motive for the pomp and circumstance relating to this establishment? Well! perchance it might be a little pardonable latent vanity that led him to wish it might not be supposed that he had no other home than that afforded him by his kind old friend. Whether this was the cause is merely conjecture; but upon the surface there appeared to be no other. However, it signifies something less than a split hair in the balance of events past or to come: there was John Hardy, loved by the high, revered by the humble, and a talisman that inspired every heart that knew him. "God bless him!" was the universal benediction when his name was mentioned, and numbers, indeed, had weighty reasons thus to pray.

His costume was singular, from never varying in shape or colour. Bottle-green was the constant shade at all times, and at all seasons ; and trousers, waistcoat, and coat, were clearly fabricated from the same piece of cloth. In the cut there was nothing peculiar, except the general impression, created by the outward show of the respective garments, that each had been severely cabbaged by the artificer. They were all too short, at all points, and exhibited his circular identity, here and there, to almost a painful tax upon the gravity of the observer. However, John recked little about being laughed at, and could join in the roar against himself as well as anybody not so immediately concerned.

"We are getting into the small hours," whispered he to the Squire. "I think I heard the clock strike one ten minutes since."

"Tush, tush, John ! it can't be so late as that."

"But it is," rejoined he, extracting a thick,

round watch with difficulty from his fob, as corroborating evidence to his assertion, and holding its dial up for general inspection.

"Put up that watch directly," returned the Squire. "Upon my word, John, I'm quite astonished at ye. Who ever heard of a man measuring the hours upon a night like this, particularly before one half the toasts have been drunk, or the wassail cup sipped from?"

"Not half the toasts?" repeated John, in surprise.

"Certainly not," replied the Squire.

"Then, all I have to say is," added John, in a tone and manner of Christian resignation, "that we shall be in the superlative condition of inebriety. That's the only remark I have to make upon the subject, Harry."

"Very good," added the Squire. "Then I'm sure we shall not hear of any objections to my proposal. Charge your glasses to the brim, every one of ye."

The mandate was obeyed with alacrity, and

then the Squire rose from his seat, and standing with a full goblet in his hand, gave, in a loud, clear, hearty voice, "OUR HEARTH AND HOMESTEAD: may friends ever surround the one, and plenty to give them be within a ring-fence of the other."

A brave echoing cheer burst from strong, stentorian lungs, as the Squire's original sentiment was given; and far away, in the clear frosty air, it was carried, startling many a rook on his lofty perch, and making him caw hoarsely at the cause of his disturbance. Soon, however, it died into silence, and then he buried his head beneath his broad jetty wing, and settled himself again to slumber.

Scarcely had the echo of the "hurrah" ceased to vibrate from all points of the compass, when a part of the middle window in the hall, in the form of a small door of about eighteen inches square, was thrown rudely open from the outside, and, simultaneously, a cracked, jarring

voice cried out, "Ho, ho! ye're o'er noisy in your glee!"

"Why, what voice is that?" said the Squire, shading his eyes with his hands, and endeavouring to obtain a clear glance at the speaker; but the strong light in the room prevented his seeing him plainly, as he stood in the dark shade of the window.

"It's that ugly, mischievous imp of Satan, Mike Crouch, I think," replied John Hardy, in a whisper scarcely audible at the distance of his arm's length; but it was heard distinctly enough by Mike.

"Yes, yes," he replied, "it's me, and my service to ye."

"How the devil could he hear what I said?" inquired John, in a voice scarcely above his breath.

"By my ears, Sir, by my ears," returned Mike, thrusting his head farther into the room, and leaning his chin upon his crossed arms.

"By Heaven!" *thought* John Hardy, for

he didn't speak a word; "he must be the devil."

"Don't be uncharitable with your neighbours, Mr. Hardy," rejoined Mike. "You've heard what is said about evil-speaking, lying, and slandering; now, you know, evil words proceed from evil thoughts. Think of that, Sir, think of that."

"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose," again was John Hardy's mute communication with his thoughts.

"So he can; no one can gainsay it," replied the imperturbable Mike, as if the words had been expressed in language plain and comprehensible to the dullest ear.

John Hardy closed his eyes, clasped his tongue between his teeth, and endeavoured *not* to think.

Mike's face was now clearly visible, from his thrusting it forward; and it must be admitted, that a more ill-favoured countenance was never seen. There was no brow to his huge square

head—for square it was as any dice that was ever shaken in a hazard-box—but two thick, black lines of hair surmounted his small, twinkling gray eyes, and acted as an index to where the forehead—by dint of exercising strong imaginative powers—might be supposed to be. His nasal organ in no way resembled the general order of noses: it was as much like an overgrown toe, a bunion, a wart, or a wen, as a nose; and but for two circular and distended apertures, which were substituted for nostrils, it could not have been correctly classed in the category of prominent features in the human face divine. His mouth occupied so much of the allotted space for his features, collectively and respectively, that, when his lower jaw was dropped, it might be correctly stated, that the half of his head was separated from the other. And Heaven knows how frequently an exhibition of his long, even, and white teeth had set little children scampering from their play, to hide and nestle, with

palpitating hearts, in their mothers' laps and bosoms. Mike was a dreadful, and a dreaded object; and when his long, spider-legs were seen striding towards them, in the form of an animated pair of fire-tongs, away they would scud, like frightened rabbits to their burrows. Body he had none; or so very small was his "corporate extension," that it did not prevent the appearance of his hips being in close conjunction with his shoulders; and to these were fixed the longest and most muscular arms that mortal ever possessed. The feats of strength related of Mike are quite beyond credence; but he has been known to run a weight up a hill, that the strongest horse would strain his bones and sinews in vain to do; and the finest wrestler in the county he once lifted from the ground with one hand, and hurled him out of the ring with the ease that he would have pitched a puny kitten.

It was the popular belief that Mike held an appointment in the immediate gift and patron-

age of the devil, and this slanderous creed was strengthened by his being the unlawful offspring of a poor harmless idiot woman, long since at peace, and freed from the jibes and jeers of scoffing insolence, and now slumbering beneath a moss-grown, daisy-speckled grave, not a jot more brainless than the dust of the ambitious and the great, festering and rotting in the mockery of their pride. But Mike evinced none of his mother's demented weakness: he was quick, shrewd, and as full of mischief as a monkey from the hour that he could bite a crust, and that was within a few days after his birth; for he was more forward and capable than any other child that was ever seen by the wondering gossips who attended him in the earliest stage of his existence. From the hour that he could lisp a syllable, he was treated alike by every living creature that he approached. All avoided him: not even a dog but slunk grumbling away when Mike crossed the threshold; but this, far from giving

offence, used to cause him to roar with laughter; and the more he was dreaded, the greater pleasure it seemed to give him. His laugh, however, was anything but a mirthful sound. It jarred harshly and discordantly on the ear, and chilled the blood of those upon whom it fell. Whenever and wherever he appeared, which he usually did in the same sudden and abrupt manner that he introduced his visage at the hall-window, it was supposed that misfortune of some kind or other was close at hand. Mike's ugly face was always considered the shadow of the coming event, and it certainly proved to be an o'er correct criterion, in too many instances of approaching evil.

"Well, Mike!" exclaimed the Squire when he saw who it was, "although not an invited guest, you're welcome one. Come in, my good lad, and have a glass of hot punch."

"Thank ye, Sir," replied Mike with a grin; "but I'm afeard I shall make one too many among ye."

“ No, no, you’ll not,” rejoined the Squire. “ At least,” continued he, correcting himself from a hint given by John Hardy’s treading rather heavily on a tender corn, “ at least not for the time it will take you to empty a glass and pocket half-a-crown. Go round ; you will find the back door on the latch, Mike.”

“ You’re very good, Sir,” returned Mike, stretching down his long arms, and, sliding head foremost on to the floor, he gave a vault backwards upon reaching it with his hands, and fell lightly and nimbly upon the soles of his feet. “ But like a rat,” continued he, showing every tooth in his gigantic cavern of a mouth, “ I can creep my body through any hole that I can pass my head.”

It was great diversion for Mike to see the sensation this feat of agility occasioned. Everybody endeavoured to assume composure and indifference at his dreaded presence : but at the same time their confusion was too apparent for concealment. There was no longer

a mingling of noisy tongues and loud boisterous peals of mirth; all were silent, thoughtful, and uneasy, and stolen glances were exchanged expressive of the feelings that dictated them.

"There," said the Squire, who was the only one present in no way discomforted by the close proximity of Mike, "scoop a bumper from that bowl, and pledge my health."

"I humbly beg your pardon, Sir," replied Mike, with a respectful bow; "but I don't like mixed liquors, and by your leave I'll take a sip of something raw and pure."

"As you please," rejoined the Squire. "You'll find what you want on the table."

With this, Mike gurgled a full half-pint glass from a bottle of fiery cogniac, and holding it above his head, cried out, "Here's to your *house-warming*, Squire Lawrence," and he poured the stinging dram, without let or stop, down his throat, and gave a loud shrill whistle at the finish, by way of

testing his powers of swallowing rebellious liquors.

"It would have choked any mortal," said John Hardy to himself, but neither lip nor tongue moved to measure the sentence.

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Mike, giving the empty glass a flourish, and tipping it upon a thumb-nail he proved there was not a drop to be drained from the bottom. "Ha, ha, ha; and so you think, Mr. Hardy, that it would *have choked any mortal throat*, do ye?"

"How do you know what I think?" returned John, almost passionately.

"Ha, ha, ha," rejoined Mike. "Ha, ha, ha." "Come, come," added the Squire in a reproving voice and manner, "remember to be respectful, Mike;" and as he said so, he threw to him a broad piece of silver.

"You're very good, Sir," replied he, scraping a bow, "and there's nothing like money to sharpen the memory. This," he continued, spinning the coin in the air and

catching it adroitly, "puts me in mind of the errand I came about."

"And what is that?"

"Hark!" rejoined Mike without heeding the question, and pointing to the roof above, "There are other messengers besides me. D'ye hear the rats over head?"

"What do you mean?" said the Squire, as a rushing noise was heard in the ceiling and adjoining panels.

"Ah! they're 'cute, cunning things," replied Mike, admiringly. "I love rats better than many mothers love their babies. I've heard they leave the ship before it sinks, and quit the tottering house before it falls, and I *know* they're soon aware when one's on fire, and long before the owner."

"*On fire!*" ejaculated twenty tongues, while horror and sickening fright paralyzed every hearer.

"Ay," returned Mike in a cool, collected manner; "I drank to your *house-warming*,

Mr. Lawrence; and if ye cast a look to the east end of this old rotten, worm-eaten pile of black bricks and mortar at this particular moment, you'll say that it was not ill-timed if it was ill-placed. For while ye've been——" and he gave three or four awkward capers by way of a conclusion to the sentence—— "your house has been burning."

"Great God!" exclaimed the Squire, and the agony of his soul was portrayed in every lineament of his countenance.

For a brief moment, for the veriest grain and atom of time, there was such a break and pause and suppression of every sound, even to the beating of hearts and pulses, that the fall of a pin would have rung loudly upon the floor.

John Hardy's voice however, was soon heard.

"If true what you say," said he, addressing Mike in a strangely altered voice, so dry and husky did it sound, "it's no time to stand

idling here; but if untrue," and he shook his clinched fist threateningly as he spoke, perhaps for the first time in his life, "you shall be ducked in a horse-pond."

"Ducked in a horse-pond!" repeated Mike. "Pretty thanks, I trow, for my errand. But there's no fear o' that, Master. Go, and what I've said will soon be proved."

Before Mike had finished his reply to John's threat, all had rushed terror-stricken from the hall, and they swept through the straight narrow passages and up the stairs and along the galleries, and, as they approached that part of the building alluded to by Mike, dense volumes of smoke rolled towards them in stifling masses.

"It's too true," gasped John Hardy.

A bright, lurid flame now burst through a partition at the extreme end of the building, and, as if by magic, the whole wall became one entire blaze.

"Back, back for your lives!" shouted the

Squire, driving the pressing crowd before him.

"By heaven!" ejaculated John Hardy, clasping his hands in despair, "all the wing's on fire."

"And so will the whole house be in a few minutes," responded the Squire. "It's past our aid or any that we can obtain. Back, I say, there. Not a soul shall remain in danger."

"Ring the alarum," cried a voice; "let us at least have all the assistance we can get."

Off ran an eager throng to perform the office; but immediately afterwards a shout was raised that "the bell-rope was gone."

"No matter," returned a voice; "I'll soon climb to the roof and set the old clacker ringing."

It was Mike who made this volunteer, and within a very short period afterwards the bell sent forth a sound that might be heard a full league away.

Every hand was now turned to saving whatever was within reach and portable. Pictures that had hung unmolested for an age upon time-worn rusty nails were torn down and hurled from the windows, among heaps of antique chairs and tables, which no sooner reached the ground than they snapped to atoms, and became little less destroyed than if burnt to ashes. From every casement and door piles of household goods were being crammed and thrown. Tapestry was torn in ribands from the walls; plate, glass, china, were all huddled and crushed together in bruised, broken, and scattered fragments. Not a finger but was stretched forth to save, and yet not one but added rather than diminished to the speed of the ruin now devouring the Squire's old home.

It was a fearful scene. Destruction, stark staring destruction, was inevitable. As well might an attempt be made to quench the crater of a burning mountain as to save the ancient house from total demolition. And still there

was a small determined band who made the attempt. Pails, buckets, jugs, and vessels of any and of every kind were filled from the pump and conveyed to all points where the flames raged the fiercest, and dashed upon them with unintermitting industry and perseverance. John Hardy flew from room to room, and roared all kinds of instructions and directions in the hoarsest possible voice, which nobody for a moment heeded or listened to. Shout rose above shout, halloo above halloo, shriek above shriek, until the din increased to one continued yell, which, as it was carried in the distance, sounded like the mingled howling of savage beasts.

“The roof, the roof,” was now the cry, and through the centre of it a clear flame shot upwards for yards into the air. High and fiercely it rose, and hissed and twirled and twined in serpent folds, and belched forth clouds of sparks, and then, as if soaring for its purpose, down it stooped, and running swiftly along the

parapets, licked the building from end to end in one flaring sheet of fire. There was one spot, however, still untouched, and that was the small belfry which stood on the rear of the roof at one end of the house, wherein Mike still remained, ringing with a force never applied to that old bell, although long since flawed and cracked by time.

“Come down, come down instantly!” hallooed the Squire, seeing the imminent danger he was in; but Mike took no notice of the order, and continued to ply the wheel with feelings of mingled delight and vengeance.

Thick, smothering volumes of smoke arose and enveloped him, and still the heavy ding-dong summoned amazed and wondering crowds for miles around. Hot, charred, and burning embers flew about his head, and fierce climbing flames crept and played within a few feet of the bell, and still the ding-dong never ceased. Flocks of frightened and dazzled birds flew in circles above the suffocating heat, and, every

now and then, dropped powerless into the blazing ruins. Ding-dong, ding-dong. Thick beams, scorched to charcoal, fell from floor to floor, and rent great yawning gaps as they crashed to the ground. Ding-dong, ding-dong. Red-hot bricks, split into fragments, and tiles and rubbish, fell as thick as hail. Ding-dong, ding-dong. Now a tall chimney reeled and tottered, and, after staggering in vain to hold its place, down, down it went, crushing in the roof, and dashing away everything in its course. Ding-ding, ding-dong.

All had quitted the tumbling ruins, except Mike, and, instead of the tumult which but a few minutes before out-Babeled Babel, were collected in a closely-packed crowd, silently, and not a few tearfully, watching the progress of the devastating element. The Squire stood a little in advance of the rest, and looked calmly upon the destruction of that which was scarcely less prized by him than life ; but when he saw a human being in peril, and that, too,

as he believed, on his account, words cannot picture his distress and agony.

"Come down, come down, in the name of Heaven!" he screamed at the very pitch of his voice; and, although Mike was no object of sympathy upon general occasions, the order was bellowed from every tongue until it might have drowned the roar of a park of artillery.

Ding-dong, ding-dong.

"D'ye hear?" again hallooed the Squire; but if he did, Mike heeded not.

Ding-dong, ding-dong.

"My God!" passionately exclaimed the Squire, "he'll be roasted alive."

Ding-dong, ding-dong.

Screams, shrieks, shouts, halloos, supplications, and threats, were all and each disregarded by Mike. There he remained in the very middle of a line of fire encircling him, and, as yet, unharmed. "I don't believe fire will burn him," said John Hardy, in a tone that could not be heard his length from where he stood.

The bell ceased.

"Fire won't burn me; eh, Mr. Hardy?
Ha, ha, ha."

John's blood curdled in his veins at these words, when they issued from Mike's lips in a loud and distinct tone.

"Did ye hear that?" whispered John.

The Squire made no reply; but kept a fixed stare upon the mysterious Mike.

Black, begrimed, and sooty, he again commenced his labour at the bell, and as the light flared intensely bright upon him, he looked like a demon summoning the condemned.

Between terror and astonishment, all eyes were bent upon Mike, and, notwithstanding the confusion his dangerous position created, many opinions were now expressed as to his being the author or instrument of the destruction of the Range. The tide of public compassion changed, and set against him.

"I knew very well that something would happen directly I saw his ugly face through the

window," observed one. "Ugly, indeed!" returned another. "He ought to have been strangled at his birth."

"Tut, tut, neighbour," added a third. "We can't choose our own faces, and we've no reason to think Mike would be so wicked. Besides, if he had fired the house, it is not very likely he'd have given notice of the act himself."

"I don't know that," rejoined a fourth. "He came and told me that my cow had broken her back; but there's very little doubt in my mind that he drove her over the chalk-pit."

"Yes, yes," said the first speaker, "he loves to be the messenger of his own mischief."

"If I thought that," replied he who was disposed to be more charitable towards Mike than the others, "I'd have let him want for a crust and a draught of milk before now, and he must have done both long ere this, if it hadn't been for me."

"He'll never beg another such meal of ye,"

remarked a bystander. "See, the fire has reached the bell-tower, and all escape is cut off."

"Get a ladder, or he must perish!" cried the Squire.

But he might as well have called for wings to have flown, and snatched him from the wretched death which threatened him. The length of three ordinary ladders would not have reached the place where Mike stood, and not one was at hand for a useless attempt to be made with.

Scarcely, however, were the last words from the Squire's lips with a frantic gesture, than Mike gave a loud, thrilling "whoop," and, springing over the side of the parapet, he clung and twined his limbs about an iron water-spout, fixed in an abutment of the building, still but slightly injured, and down the edge of it he slipped, with the speed of an arrow dipping from air to earth.

"There," said he, clasping his hands behind

him, and striding towards the crowd with the gait of a pair of compasses. "There," repeated he, "that's about the only fireside I ever left with regret. I had it all to myself, and it will be many a long year before I forget its glow."

"A murrain on ye for so speaking of it!" exclaimed a voice in the rear of the throng.

"Are you hurt, Mike?" asked the Squire, hurrying forwards to meet him.

"No, and thank ye kindly, Sir," replied he.

"Why did you remain so long there uselessly exposing yourself to danger?"

"An' may it please ye, Sir," returned Mike, "a little danger gives a fillip to sport."

"*Sport!*" angrily ejaculated the Squire.

"Ay," coolly rejoined Mike. "Sport to some is often death and ruin to others; but that's no reason we shouldn't enjoy it."

"Hang the villain!" John Hardy was about to exclaim; but he checked the im-

pulse just in time to prevent the sentence being uttered.

"The hemp isn't sown yet, Mr. Hardy, for the twisting of the cord," said Mike, with a grin.

At this moment the ground on which they stood quivered again, as the remainder of the roof fell in with a terrific crash, and then a thick cloud of dust, ashes, and smoke, arose and completely obscured the burning pile; and when it had been wafted away, nothing remained to view of the Range, but the skeleton of the outward walls—a sightless ruin.

"I say, my masters," observed Mike, as he pointed to the smouldering heap, "ye'll never hold your revel there again. No, no. The fiddle, the song, and the dance will not cheer and warm your hearts in the old manor-house when Christmas comes again. Ye'll think of that, no matter where ye may be, I ween."

Sobs were now heard from various parts of the crowd of sorrowing spectators.

“ Ay, ye can weep,” continued Mike, “ and so could I if I had the like cause. But then, d’ye see, Mike Crouch never had any. No, I often laugh ; but a tear—by the Lord ! I should like to know where tears are pumped from ? ” and then, stretching his hands upon the ground, he threw himself over and over, after the fashion of a hoop in motion, and in this way trundled himself rapidly out of sight.

CHAPTER II.

“ True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy ;
Which is as thin of substance as the air,
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north,
And, being anger'd, puffs away from thence,
Turning his face to the dew-dropping south.”

A WATCHFUL cock, who had been blinking and winking, in his dosy uncertain sleep, for a glimpse of pale light now threatening to tinge the dark border of the East, caught the maiden blush of the fresh young morn ; and, shaking off the dull effects of slumber, heralded the coming day with a bold challenge of his prowess. Drowsy rooks were awakened

by his shrill clarion note ; and, ere it had been thrown back by a neighbouring rival, loud and quick in his reply to the defiance, things of the day began to flutter from bough and twig, and sheltered retreats, in thatched-roofed eaves, and hollow, crumbling trees, and ivy-twined walls, and from beds delved in massive hay-stacks, and from all kinds of warm sheltering nooks, where the cold and nipping winter's wind could find no entrance.

It is of little importance, and signifies less in the linking of events than the thinnest film of the smallest spider's web in the specific gravity of the globe, whether the waking sounds of earth, collectively or respectively, caused the closed eyes of John Hardy to become unsealed and stark-staring open as abruptly and suddenly as if a spring had been pressed upon their fastenings. Sufficient be it for us to know that there he lay, deeply wedged between a double ridge of soft eider-down, with a mountain of blankets drawn even

to his chin, and a fat dropsical pillow swelling beneath the weight of his head, indistinctly conscious of possessing a closer affinity to life than to death's half-brother. Rather below his eyebrows, a white cotton night-cap was pulled ; and this, perhaps, somewhat impeded his slow perception of surrounding matter and material ; for, although his organs of vision were stretched to the utmost limit of their capacity, still they appeared like ice on the surface of a muddy pool, and as yet but poorly sensible to their offices. Whether John's brow was clouded by his nightcap, or that his brain continued dark and foggy, from the honest draughts he had drained to the Squire's oft-repeated toasts and sentiments, cannot be ascertained to the nicety that the subject merits ; but that he was in a chaos of bewilderment no one could doubt, who caught but the faintest and most fugitive glance of his upturned and partly exposed countenance. There was no puckering of lips and of cheeks from inward

mirth, as of old, when waking from his profound and unbroken rest. The sunset of his light and merry dreams was generally in smiles; but now they had sunk 'mid sighs and wrinkles.

Slowly, very slowly, John raised a hand from the depths and intricacies of the bed-clothes, and, in a state between doubt and fear, drew off the covering to his head, and held it, for close inspection, before his eyes. After bestowing a more minute examination upon the object than it would seem to warrant, from any peculiar quality or virtue it possessed, he dropped it upon the quilt, and, raising himself in solemn silence upon an elbow, jerked back the thick hangings of the bed. Now, like the hot glowing summer's sun, bursting through the vapourish mist, and lifting it from tree and flower, the truth began to dart its rays through John's murky brain, and to leave its ideal imageries stripped of all their fantasy. The nightcap was circumstantial

evidence ; but the bottle-green suit, suspended upon the back of a chair—scarcely green in the pale light of morning—proved the conclusive link in the chain of evidence, and effectually dispelled any shade of scepticism that might yet be fitting in the mind of John Hardy.

“ Thank Heaven ! ” exclaimed he, energetically, “ thank Heaven, there are my breeches ! ” and, leaping from the bed, he commenced a species of dance round and about the floor, which comprised the innocent and healthy recreation of playing leapfrog with every moveable in the apartment. Yes, there was John Hardy, in a garment strangely deficient—as, indeed, all his garments were—in the ordinary proportions of one coming under the denomination of a shirt, skipping over the backs of chairs, hopping at a bound upon the table, and springing dangerously again upon the ground, at a fearful risk of broken limbs, bruises, and contusions.

"It was a dream!" he ejaculated, stopping in the act of jumping over his slippers; "a horrid, wretched dream!" and, as if the idle fancy of his feverish sleep became sensible to sight, John threw himself into a sparring attitude, and fixing a steady look at the corner of the room, he gradually neared that which he seemed to see; and, coming within hitting distance, he flung his clinched fists out, with the swiftness and precision of a champion of the ring, into the thin and unresisting air.

After indulging in several rounds, John became exceedingly refreshed and comfortable in his mind, although the vigour of the exercise quickly reduced the quantity of breath in store in his body.

"There," said he, "I've done with you; and when I've anything more to do with dreams, I hope that I may not sleep again for a month."

And was it all, then, nothing more than a dream? The truth must be confessed. Up to

the moment of Mike's imagined appearance at the window, John's head was not so fumigated by punch, and other rebellious liquors, but that, by dint of great exertion, he comprehended the distinction between standing on his heels and his head. An ill-timed and unfortunate attempt, however, to join in a boisterous reel, completely upset the remaining drains of this desirable perception; and, in accordance with the Squire's directions, John was lifted from his fallen state, and carried to the repose of his dormitory. Here he quickly yielded to the lulling influence of sleep; but, although he snored most sonorously, his heated brain was busy in unreal vagaries; and among them, it set in a blaze, and consigned to destruction, the old manor-house. Plain and palpable the scene of confusion and ruin to the fabric appeared; and, if it had been true, as it seemed to be, not a circumstance connected with it could have been more vivid. Not but there was some truth mingled

with the creation of his fancy. There was a Mike Crouch, and he was precisely of the ungainly figure and bearing represented in the dream. Children, too, were afraid of him, from a delight he took in making ugly faces at them, and people of a larger growth in no way courted his society. Still he was anything but the supernatural being represented in John Hardy's imagination! and although he would occasionally practise a common and dangerous proceeding of thinking for his neighbours, he possessed no extraordinary means of anticipating their thoughts. No one could exactly tell the means and appliances that Mike had for obtaining a livelihood; but they were so far independent as never to require him to work or to beg. Whether his slight respect for the acknowledged laws concerning the rights of property in any way contributed to his support, is a matter to be left between him and his conscience; as, if he had broken them either from ignorance or design, hitherto

he possessed the very great advantage of having never been found out. It must be admitted, for even Mike's best friend—and that was John Hardy—reluctantly confessed, he was a vagabond. Occupation requiring the mildest form of labour, even to scare birds from trespassing in the corn-fields—and for that Mike was especially well adapted—he would decline. But, to slot a deer, or to ball a fox, or prick a hare, or seal an otter, he would scour the country round for miles; and let it be never so far, he was unwearied by the unprofitable task. At least it would seem a bootless one, to merely track the “whereabout” of these denizens of the wild; and that was all Mike's end appeared to be, when watched by the suspicious eyes of jealous game-keepers. Appearances, however, are sometimes telegraphs for deception; and they were so in this instance, for his discovery generally gained him a premium for the information he rendered others. To the im-

patient sportsman, and the poacher, he proved a most valuable accessory; and so keen was his relish of enjoyment in giving them intelligence, that seldom a day passed but he sought the means of procuring it. Now, although John Hardy could not be designated a poacher—for he took out a properly stamped certificate, and never infringed the law of trespass—yet his mode of filling his bag was far from being a sportsman-like one. Accompanied by Mike, who invariably directed his movements in the field, he had a slaughtering habit of blazing away at the partridges while on the ground, by poking his gun through the hedges; and if a hare was found upon her form, she was never warned to quit it, as a preliminary to driving an ounce and a half of number six through her head. As soon as Mike's well-directed finger betrayed the spot where puss was crouched, bang! r-r-r! roared John's noisy piece, and over she rolled, struggling in the convulsions of death, even in her seat. In

short, John Hardy was a pot-hunter. No matter how the game was killed, so long as it was bagged; and the easier and readier the facility offered for the attainment of this object, the greater satisfaction it afforded him. In spite of the Squire's rating, he persisted in following up this rule; and it might be, the difficulty he found in attempting the legitimate order of pursuit, made him observe no exception in it. Thus, John Hardy and his able assistant continued the even tenor of their way, much to the discomfiture of the winged and fleet-limbed tribe.

Checking his almost frantic delight at the discovery of the delusion, John slipped himself into the bottle-green, and, after plunging his throbbing temples into a basin of water, cold as a sharp frost could render it in such a protected situation, and drinking a prodigious draught, by way of an internal cooler, he threw open the latticed casement of his bed room window, and inhaled the fresh, stinging

air, as it rushed in, with greater pleasure than he ever swallowed a bumper of wine.

How glad and hearty John's rubicund visage looked, as he stretched it out of the window, and regarded the familiar scene before him ! There were the towering old trees, with every limb and twig powdered over with the hoar frost, and the grass glistened with myriads of sparkling diamonds, like an endless succession of fairy lights. A brook, in the distance, that babbled and murmured over its pebble bed in the spring and summer time, was now fast locked in the iron grasp of winter ; and the moor-hen and gay-feathered teal had to seek their scanty fare among the frozen sedges, instead of diving below its rippling surface. The large and thick hawthorn bush, speckled with scarlet berries, and which always caught the first gleams of the sun, began to shed rolling drops from every briar, and fell pattering upon the dried and withered leaves beneath. A robin, perched upon a topmost twig, was

whistling his winter song, and a hungry mavis gathered his early breakfast from the plenty spread for his repast, when the worm remained in her earthy home.

“Egad!” exclaimed John Hardy, rubbing his hands together briskly, “what a bright, bracing morning it is! I feel that I could play leap-frog with the poplars!”

At this moment, a figure became visible from behind a screen of laurels at the eastern corner of the house, and the long, narrow shadow thrown before, preceded by some half-score yards the body from which it was cast.

“What, Mike! is that you so early?” inquired John Hardy.

“And your servant, Sir,” replied Mike: “it is.”

“Is there any thing particular, then?” rejoined John, suppressing his voice to a scarcely audible tone.

Mike stretched his hands and long arms into the fathomless pockets of his trousers (for, like

some parts of the ocean, they had no bottom), tipped the battered remains of an extremely shabby hat upon the end of his nose, and gave a slow and measured nod of inexpressible significance.

"Is it a covey under a hedge?" said John, in a hoarse whisper.

Mike's head conveyed a negative.

"A hare in her form?"

The negative was repeated.

"Have ye harboured an outlying deer?"

Again Mike expressed a silent "No;" and, lifting a finger, beckoned his examiner to come closer, previous to his making the communication.

In a few minutes—for it took some minutes to unbar and unbolt the heavy entrance to the Range—John Hardy, muffled up in a red woollen comforter, which threatened to choke him, and a long camlet cloak, causing him to trip at every second step, stood within conferring distance.

"Well! and what is it, Mike?" said he.

"I beg your pardon, Sir," replied Mike; "but—" and then he checked himself abruptly, and gave a vacant look into the air immediately above his head.

This was exceedingly mysterious; and John expressed his astonishment by elevating his eyebrows, and adding the monosyllable, "What?"

"You'll not be offended, Sir?"

"I know of no cause, Mike," replied John Hardy, "and I hope there's none for me to learn."

"It wasn't altogether my fault," rejoined Mike, by way of a preface.

"That you must leave for me to judge. We are not to decide upon our deeds or our misdeeds."

"Right or wrong, hit or miss," returned Mike, recklessly, "here goes. But I fear," added he, with a sigh, "that I've been and done it."

"Done what?"

"Myself, Sir," replied Mike, giving himself a melodramatic thump upon the bosom. "Yes, Mr. Hardy, I fear that I've hashed myself very brown!"

"Speak plainly," responded John. "Don't deal with me in riddles."

"I will, Sir," added Mike. "Then, what I mean to say is, I'm *cut* grass!"

"You've been pilfering," said John, shaking his head in an admonitory manner, "and been found out."

"I may have been collecting a few stray articles, Mr. Hardy," replied Mike, who invariably designated his appropriation of other persons' goods and chattels by this mild description, "but I'm not the fool to be caught round a corner. No, Sir; that's not the ad-dled egg in my nest!"

"Then, what is?"

Mike sighed, and thus began the relation of his wo:—

"A bad name, Mr. Hardy, often prevents a

poor fellow from getting a good meal of victuals, and it may be on account of this that I've often felt so precious hungry. Thanks be to you, Sir, however, I've been able many a time to take my stomach by surprise, and astonish it with a lining that considerably strengthened its sinking weakness. Indeed, Sir, I'll make the confession, that I've looked upon you, of late, as a cold joint in the cupboard—a circumstance that might be cut and come again at. This was my hope; this my belief till late last night; but now I feel, Mr. Hardy"—Mike almost blubbered—"it's all my eye and Betty Martin!"

"What have you been doing, then, to forfeit my occasional assistance?" said John.

"I'll tell the truth," replied Mike, after a short pause, as if speculating upon the expediency of alleging the opposite. "I'll tell the truth, Mr. Hardy, although it's like tugging my teeth out whenever I try. While cooling my heels in the village, just after the mail passed

through, and thinking how hard it was that I never was asked to harvest-homes or winter frolics, in the same way that other Christians were, and not a halfpenny in my pouch to get a whiff of tobacco, by way of a plaster to the sore, a woman, muffled up so that I couldn't see her face, and by her voice I knew to be a stranger, asked me if I knew a gentleman of your name.

“‘Yes,’ said I, ‘I do; and a very nice kind of gentleman he is. It’s a pity there a’n’t a few more of the same kind in this neighbourhood.’

“‘Ah, that it is!’ she replied; and it sounded as if she meant what she said.

“‘Have you any particular business with Mr. Hardy?’ asked I, by way of squeezing her sponge.

“‘I’ve a basket here for him,’ said she, bringing a tidy large hamper from under a shawl; ‘and I wish it delivered to him as quickly as possible.’

"With this I offered to carry it, and, after pocketing a shilling for the job, she placed the basket in my arms, saying, 'Be sure and keep the lid up, and don't jolt it.'

"'Is it glass?' I inquired.

"'Not exactly,' replied she; 'but it requires quite as much care, and the more you take of it, the greater may be your reward some day.'

"'Am I to deliver any message with it?' said I.

"'No,' she returned, walking quickly away; and I thought I heard a sound soon afterwards, as if she was trying to hide a considerable flood of tears; but that might be only my fancy.

"The load was not a heavy one, and I was running with it down here, when a wicked thought jumped into my head that it was a Christmas present from some one of your friends, Mr. Hardy; and, knowing how you deserved to be treated, I couldn't help suspect-

ing there might be much more than you wanted."

Mike hesitated to proceed.

"Go on," said John; "I shall not feel offended if you adhere to the truth, whatever you did."

"It's cheerful to hear you say so, Sir," resumed Mike. "Thinking," continued he, "that it might be a nice fat turkey, two or three capons, some sausages, with two or three odds and ends of the same kind, I considered it would be no great loss if I cabbaged a supper or so out of the lot, particularly if you didn't miss it. It was very wrong, Sir, to think of serving your property in such a way, but a hungry dog shows very little respect to fat or lean."

"And so, I suppose," interrupted John, with a smile, although he flattered himself that he was looking majestically stern, and unprecedentedly savage; "and so, I suppose," repeated he, "that you helped yourself?"

“Not in the way you may chance to think, Sir,” returned Mike. “Being unable to withstand the temptation,” he continued, “I hastened home with the load, instead of keeping the straight path to you; and, no sooner there, than I out with my knife, and cut the cord laced round the top of the hamper.”

“It was very wrong, Mike,” said John, with as much gravity as he could assume. “Really, it was very wrong.”

“I know it was, Mr. Hardy,” replied Mike, “and I feel it, as the parson says we should feel our sins—in’ards. However, what’s undone cannot be done in many cases; and so I found it with the basket. Prepare your eyes, Sir, prepare your eyes, Sir,” repeated he; “for they may be more inclined to fly out of your head than mine were, and if so, spectacles will be of no use straddling across your nose for the time to come. What do you suppose, Mr. Hardy,” continued Mike,

in a slow, measured tone, which conveyed much more than his words, "met my sight at the bottom of that hamper?"

"Heaven knows!" ejaculated John.

"And so do I, Sir," rejoined Mike; "and dropping his voice to a husky whisper, he added—"it was a sleeping baby."

"A what?" shouted John Hardy, while the colour forsook his cheeks as suddenly as if it had been wiped out with the facility that the trace of rouge is expunged with a damp cloth—"A what!" hallooed he.

"A baby," returned Mike. "Perhaps," continued he, "not quite a yearling."

The intelligence staggered John Hardy, and completely overwhelmed him. He could do nothing but open and shut his eyes, as if they smarted intensely from the contents of a snuff-box being jerked into them, and his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth, mute with astonishment.

"It's true," resumed Mike. "There lay

a fat, chubby babe on a little handful of straw, as fast asleep as a dormouse in winter."

"And—and—and what did you do with it, Mike?" inquired John, with feelings little less enviable than a bilious person at sea extremely qualmish.

"I'll not act, said I to myself, in delivering this package as if I didn't know what was in it," replied Mike; "but I'll go and tell Mr. Hardy what has happened, and do like some of the unfortunate chaps do at quarter-sessions, by throwing myself upon the mercy of the Court. Well, Sir, I lifted the baby as tenderly as I could by the nape of the neck, and shoved it into my bed, which was no sooner done than it set up such a squeal that all but deafened me. After, however, a little tenderness, and a few soft words, such as mothers use, mixed with a slight flavour of damns for the trouble, and letting it have an old stocking to suck, for want of better nourishment, it became pretty quiet, and grumbled itself again to

sleep. After that, I ran down to the Range for the purpose of seeing you, Sir, and——”

Mike broke short off in his narrative.

John gave a sickly nod of encouragement for him to proceed.

“I *did* see you, Mr. Hardy,” continued he, emphatically; “but not in a mood to listen.”

“What was I doing?” asked John, with potent misgivings upon the policy of his question.

“Stretching yourself upon the floor of the servants’ hall,” replied Mike, struggling to conceal a laugh.

“Go on,” said John Hardy, in the tone of one considering himself a martyr to circumstances. “Tell me what followed, Mike.”

“I kept my own counsel,” responded Mike, “and returned home, intending to seek you as early as I could this morning, to inform you of the business before anybody was stirring.

“That was careful and wise of ye, Mike,”

added John. "But what became of the—the infant?"

"It nestled in my arms, Sir," replied Mike, "and if I hadn't lain upon it now and then accidentally, I don't think it would have cried much. As it was, my beginning in the nursing line didn't prove so pleasant that I want to have a second bout of it."

"Is it a girl or a boy?" asked John.

"I can't say, Mr. Hardy," responded Mike; "for I'm not over curious in such matters."

"Was there no letter in the basket?"

"None that I could find," returned Mike. "There was a card tied round the neck of the child, and there was some writing upon it; but as I can't read, of course I don't know what it means."

"Come, then," added John, "we'll go to your cabin, Mike, and endeavour to unriddle this mystery."

Mike had been his own architect and builder in the erection of his edifice, which comprised

one room of no particular shape, and designed to hold not more than one person at a time, except squeezing and crushing were resorted to. This mansion in miniature, which Mike designated his "kennel," was situate on the border of an extensive common belonging to the Squire, and which, from the thick patches of gorse mingled the dwarf blackberry bush, and tall, withered, and rank grass growing here and there, afforded a secure covert for the fox and the badger, the owl and the night-hawk, and other wanderers in the stilly night, whom Mike was fond of listening to when brooding before the dying embers of his lone fireside. The walls of his house were composed of dried furze and clay, and the roof was rudely thatched with bulrushes and sedges from a neighbouring slimy and stagnant pool. Door there was none; but a thick faggot, which could be removed at pleasure, performed the office, and a stake thrust through the centre, so as to catch the two posts marking the entrance, made a very good

substitute in the shape of an effective barricade.

The internal arrangements of Mike's establishment were of the most primitive order. A round log of wood, of about three feet in height, was the only seat that he had to air himself before the fire on; while a square piece of board, placed at will across his knees, or on the floor, took the place of a more legitimate table, when Mike, fortunately, had any use for one. The only other articles of household furniture consisted of a tea-kettle, which had been picked from the obscurity of a ditch, having, in the estimation of its late owner, become quite past tinkering, and a bed, composed of a bundle of straw, stitched up in a ragged piece of canvass. The covering to this unique couch, whereon Mike courted "the honey heavy dew of slumber," was composed of dried but untanned skins of badgers, which, although warm, and nearly impenetrable to cold, sent forth a strong and somewhat offensive smell.

All in all, "the kennel" was an establishment remarkable for originality of design in the economy of its details and the strict observance with which they were carried out.

"I left him asleep," said Mike, in a whisper, as he drew the faggot from the entrance.

"Him, eh?"

"Well, Sir!" expostulated Mike. "It must be either a him or a her, and it's the toss up of a halfpenny which it is."

"That's true, Mike," returned John, with a sage shake of the head; "that's very true."

Upon entering the limited apartment, John perceived the object of their discourse muffled in the unodoriferous coverlet, stretched on Mike's humble pallet, and in the full enjoyment of a peaceful sleep. A bright ray of sunshine had struggled through a crevice in the wall, and streaked itself upon the child's closed eyes; and this, perhaps, had caused it to raise a dimpled hand across its brow as a shade to the dazzling light. Long and dark lashes fringed its eyelids,

and a thin line was drawn in an arch above them as if marked by a pencil. A smile—and a smile only that infants wear when very happy—played upon its lip, pouting as if stung by some envious bee, and light flaxen and silky locks crisped themselves round and about its head. Beauty in all things is a powerful though silent advocate; but in nothing is it more so than in infancy; and if ever this pleader to human sympathies wore a more captivating garb than was her wont, when luring the better feelings of our nature to good and praiseworthy purposes, then, indeed, she never was arrayed in more pleasing form than in this sleeping child.

“Upon my word,” said John Hardy, stooping over the little unconscious slumberer, “it’s a nice, plump, rosy-cheeked fellow;” and as he spoke he bent his lips downwards and imprinted a kiss which, for its warmth and heartiness, sounded any thing but coming from the lips of a stranger.

“What does this say?” continued John,

taking his spectacles from his pocket; and placing them on a convenient ledge on his nose, he commenced reading the superscription upon a large square card suspended about the neck of his charge. "Humph! it's difficult to make out," said John, endeavouring to obtain a proper focus. "'Be'—what?—oh! 'BE A FATHER TO THE FATHERLESS.'" Upon my life!" exclaimed he, arriving at a conclusion of the sentence so illegibly scrawled, and looking over his glasses, "this is no joke. The fatherless no doubt must be in want of a father; but really I ought not to be called upon to make good the deficiency, eh, Mike?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Hardy," replied Mike, making a dive with his hands into his bottomless pockets, and giving sundry nods of approval to this sentiment of his patron. "Certainly not, Sir," repeated he.

"What's to be done then?"

"We can set it aside," rejoined Mike, cool as a cucumber in the dewy morn.

"Set it aside!" repeated John. "What do you mean?"

"Oh?" returned Mike, stretching out a leg, and regarding its unfair proportions with a glance approaching to vanity: "you don't know what setting aside infants is, Mr Hardy?" and then he smiled, as if in compassion for his patron's innocence.

"No, Mike, I do not."

"You're aware what people do when they've more kittens than they want, Sir?" added Mike.

John gave a silent assent.

"Well, Sir! that's it—that's setting kids aside."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed John, "what—drowning them?"

"It doesn't follow as a matter of course that they must be *drowned*," replied Mike. "Different folks have different opinions and different methods of doing business."

John looked at the collected Mike most sternly at the conclusion of this sentence; and,

had it not been for his attention being suddenly called to the waking child, he might have said something correspondent with his grave expression.

Our affections are often influenced by the veriest trifles. A look, a smile, a well-timed word, have won and put a seal upon many a heart. No sooner were the eyes of the child opened and fixed on John's, than he felt—to use his own graphic description—completely done for.

“You little rogue,” said he, squeezing its cheeks considerably out of their natural shape, “you sha’n’t be set aside. No, no, no. Whoever you may be, and wherever you may be from, I’ll take care of that;” and never doubt John kept his word.

CHAPTER III.

"Promising is the very air o' the time."

It was worse than useless for John to argue, reason, expostulate, cajole, or threaten, when bantered—and when was there a day that he was not?—about the contents of the hamper. The Squire roared with glee at this inexhaustible subject, and insisted upon expressing his belief that John was a closer relative to the boy—for a boy he turned out to be—than he was fain to admit. "Yes, yes," he would say, "the saddle's put on the right horse. This accounts for the 'place in town,' and all that smoke is blown away. Oh, John, I little thought that you were a gay deceiver!"

Then John eloquently and emphatically denied the soft impeachment, and asserted that there was no more cause for the accusation than if a dead goose had been consigned to him instead of a fat baby. He gained, however, nothing by this defence; and finding the difficulty unsurpassable of being able to prove the negative, he at length abandoned the attempt, and submitted in a kind of miserable resignation to the squibs that were so plentifully fired at his expense.

"I can't help it," John Hardy sighed, "I can't help it, if you'll not believe a man upon his honour;" and then he placed a hand in a most effective manner upon his waistcoat, and pressed it energetically.

Whether the Squire gave credence to John's negation within himself, is a question that might be answered with safety in the affirmative; but for the mirth which the pretence in disbelieving it excited, he continued to express a total want of faith in the declaration of innocence.

"Why was the child sent to you if you had no hand in the matter?" asked he, as they sat sipping their wine some six months after the occurrence.

"How should I know, Harry?" replied John, slightly ruffled with the subject under discussion. "It was an accident—a sort of come-by-chance, I suppose."

"But why fix upon you in preference to anybody else?"

"Now, there you are baiting me again?" ejaculated John. "I wish you'd drop the affair, I have told you before," continued he, slapping his crossed dexter leg, "and I tell ye again, Harry, that I know nothing more of the boy than the man in the moon. I can't tell how he came—"

"Yes you can," interrupted the Squire: "it was in a hamper, you recollect, brought by Mike Crouch."

"Neither can I say who from," resumed John, without noticing the interruption

"Has he recovered from the measles?" asked the Squire, breaking off at a tangent.

"Yes, thank God!" replied John, regaining a look of pleasure. "I was at Dame Woodley's cottage this morning, and I found him as merry as a singing bird."

"Does the old woman still think him an angel wafted from heaven in a basket?"

"Yes," returned John, laughing; "his nurse sticks to the creed of such being the mode of his coming to me."

"Well," added the Squire, "it's an original method, certainly."

"I have ordered him to be christened to-morrow," observed John.

"Who are to be the sponsors?" asked the Squire.

"Dame Woodley and Mike," replied John. "It was a particular desire of Mike to become his god-father."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the Squire. "I fear that Mike is sadly deficient in those

duties which he undertakes to see performed."

Time never slackens his speed : on he goes, without let, check, or stop. The seasons round, night and day he wings his flight, as though he had an end to gain ; and yet to Time there is no end. So years flee away, and ages roll, and the to-morrows, from infancy to age, are but the echoes of our yesterdays.

It was a bright and beautiful morning in early spring. Daisies pied and buttercups were thickly scattered over the meadows, and sweeter flowers drew with their fragrant breath the honey-bee from its hive, now sadly deficient in the thrifty store leased for the winter gone. That joyous herald of nature's coming charms, the careless butterfly, vain of its fresh-fledged plumes, flitted from bud to blossom, and dipped into many a varied cup, and rifled the depths of the pale cowslip and the daffodil, and kissed the lip of every opening flower in his path. Frugal ants issued from their homes, delved in

the dry and dusty earth, and hastened to tasks of industry while the sun was up and shining brightly. Happy, light-hearted birds, trilled ringing songs from every bush and bough; and not a creature, not a thing, but looked gay "as a younker prancing to his love."

By the verge of a narrow stream, in whose bed patches of dark-green sedges reared themselves to sigh and rustle in the breeze, Mike Crouch—somewhat older by a few fleeting years, but yet unchanged in custom or manner—strolled at day-break. With measured tread he walked along the bank, and every now and then stopped to examine any soft oozy spot that must easily yield an impression to the lightest footfall. Occasionally he grasped the trunk of an overhanging tree to assist him in his work of close inspection, and after assuring himself that the object of his search had not been there to give him a hint of his whereabouts, he continued to pace leisurely along, and to brush the heavy dew from the greensward.

"I suppose," said Mike, soliloquizing, "that Master Tom will find me out presently. I wonder," continued he, "that he hasn't done so ere this."

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a small figure was seen bounding forwards, followed by a large shaggy deerhound of the purest breed. His broad deep chest, and long stalwart limbs, were formed for the strength of a lion; and his courage was unquestionable, from the full, flashing eye under his bristled brows.

"Oh, here he comes!" observed Mike, catching a glimpse of the approach of the object of his thoughts.

"Ha, ha, Mike! kind, good, old Mike!" cried a young voice, in the very exuberance of unchecked youthful spirits.

"Yes, yes," replied Mike, shaking a raised finger of admonition, "that's the way you come over me, Master Tom, when breaking orders. You know very well what Mr. Hardy said about coming out so early as this."

"Never mind," rejoined the boy, who might have seen some eight or ten summers; "never mind what he says, Mike. I love to be with you all day long."

"But you *must* mind what he says," returned Mike, sternly; "and as for being with me all day long, you should like the company of your books much better."

"I can't, Mike," added Master Tom, poutingly. "I can't like books. I hate them all, every one."

"Exactly so," said Mike, diving his hands into his still bottomless pockets, and bearing in his ill-favoured face the expression of a martyr. "Exactly so," repeated he, "and then *I* get blamed for such notions. Only yesterday, after our ramble for birds' eggs, Mr. Hardy told me that I was spoiling of ye, and making ye as great a vagabond as myself."

"Don't be angry," replied the boy, placing his hand upon the head of the dog, and look-

ing at Mike supplicatingly. "Safeguard and me are never happy except with you, and when I would remain at home, he won't let me."

"What do you mean?" asked Mike with a smile.

"He looks into my face, and licks my hands, and goes to the door and whines," rejoined Master Tom, in his plea of justification, "and at last I feel that I must do as he wants me."

"A very pretty sort of a sermon that is!" returned Mike. "And so you obey a dog instead of Mr. Hardy, who, as Dame Woodley says, if ever a saint wore double-milled bottle-green superfine cloth, is decidedly one of the tip-top order. I should to know whether *you* can expect to go up'ards?" and the speaker pointed with indubitable signification to the blue and ethereal vault of heaven.

"I never heard you preach before," added Master Tom, with an air of discontent.

"I hope, then, you'll profit by the first hearing," said Mike, "and remember that you must try to please your benefactor before Safeguard."

"What is a benefactor?" inquired the boy.

"A chap that gives one wittles and drink for nothing," responded Mike. "That's what I call a prime sort of a benefactor, and no mistake about his pedigree."

"I'll try and do as you tell me," said the boy, "for I suppose Mr. Hardy is what you call my benefactor."

"I should just think," replied Mike deliberately, while he endeavoured to thrust his fingers through some exceedingly coarse and matted hair, sticking out from under his damaged and battered hat: "I should just think," repeated he, "that Mr. Hardy is the cream of your milk, Master Tom; and it's your duty, which you should like as your play, and perhaps a little better, to make that old gentleman as comfortable, by your behaviour, as a treacle posset does a damp stomach."

"I will, then, Mike, I will, indeed," rejoined Master Tom, evidently affected by Mike's homily.

"In that case," added Mike, "I shall, out of school hours, and at such times and seasons that you're not more profitably occupied, be glad to teach ye fishing, or any other pastime o' the sort; but for the future we mustn't be seen so much together, Master Tom."

"What are you looking for?" asked the boy, as his companion regarded a raised lump of black mud not far from the edge of the stream, and on which a few osiers sprouted.

"When I've found what I'm after," replied Mike, "I'll show ye."

"Tell me now," rejoined the boy.

"By a bishop's wig," swore Mike, "women and children are as full of curiosity as sound nuts are full of kernels. Humph!" continued he, striding without much regard to the wetting of his feet, into the water, and looking with intense interest at some indentures in the

mud; "then he's down the stream, as I expected?"

"Who is down the stream?" inquired his companion.

"An otter, Master Tom," replied Mike; "and if I may judge by his seals, as large a varmint as ever cracked the spine of a trout."

"Let's find him, Mike," rejoined the boy, clapping his hands with delight. "What fun we had with the last we speared?"

"Well!" exclaimed Mike, examining Master Tom with a slow gaze, from his booted heel to the curls dancing about his forehead, "I *am* rasped! What had you to do with the spearing of him, I should like to know?"

"I did my best to help ye," returned his companion, "and got out of my depth twice in keeping him from a drain."

"That's true enough," added Mike, clapping the boy between his shoulders; "that's true enough," repeated he; "and if you'll keep a mute tongue between your teeth, we'll

have a bit of sport all to ourselves this morning."

"Shall I go home for the dogs?" asked the boy.

"No, no," replied Mike. "We've dogs enough if we find him. Safeguard's a team in himself, and is always ready for anything from a cockroach to an elephant."

Cautiously Mike dragged down the stream, and every now and then cheered the hound to hit off the scent.

"Wind him, Safeguard; drag on him!" cried he, as the hound eagerly sniffed among the rushes, and evinced the eagerness to obey the order, by plunging among the flags and weeds, and scattering the black mire in showers around, as he splashed through the stream, from one side to the other. The crafty moor-hen, scared from her sedgy retreat, flapped her wing and rose with a shrill call, to find a more secure refuge from the trespassers on her home. Rats stole, with creeping steps, along the edge of the water,

and sprung into holes delved deeply in the clay, and then, when their disturbers no longer left a sound of their footfall, peered again from their burrows, with sharp, cautious glances, and again sought their early breakfast. An old heron, who had been standing as motionless as the green moss-grown stone hard by, against which the current had broken for countless years in murmuring discontent, left her task of gorging the finny tribe, and, stretching her broad pinions, soared high from the ground, and cleaved her flight towards a thick, dark wood, looming through the mist still hanging upon the hill and rolling through the valley.

“Hoik, Safeguard,” cried Mike, as the hound became more busy in his hunt, and the seals more numerous, at every stride that he took. “He’s not far from here,” continued he, picking up a fine trout, partly eaten, and the scales yet slimy and fresh. “Hoik, Safeguard, wind him ; drag on him, good hound !”

Mike had scarcely given the cheer to Safeguard's energies, when, with a spring that might have rivalled an antelope clearing a mountain torrent, the hound dashed under the upturned roots of a fallen elder tree stretching across the stream.

"Go for'ard, shouted Mike to his companion ;
"go for'ard ; he's down, as sure as —— ; look there he is," continued he, with flushed cheek and flashing eyes, as he pointed to some thin air-bubbles rising to the surface of the water.
D'ye see him vent?"

With a loud, ringing halloo, his young companion ran along the bank, while Mike remained where he stood, in case the other might make a double in his dive.

"Cry out if you see him," said Mike, with stentorian lungs.

"Here, here!" shouted the boy. "He's here, Mike."

"For'ard, Safeguard!" cried Mike, lifting the eager hound from the centre of the stream,

where he plunged and lashed it into a frothy foam. "For'ard, for'ard," and away the dog flew to the call; and, catching a glimpse of the otter as he rose from a long dip from the depths where the green rush springs, he leaped into the water just where his prey appeared, and sent the spray hissing for yards away. Again the otter sought security in dipping below, and Safe-guard's willing jaws were baulked of their prey.

"We'll press him to the shallows if we can," said Mike, tearing a stout cudgel from a bough; "we must pull him down."

"Oh Mike!" replied Master Tom, while his eyes dilated, and his cheeks crimsoned with excitement, "Oh Mike!" repeated he, "if we can but kill him."

"If we drive him through Crank's hole," rejoined Mike, "he's ours to a certainty. Get a stick, or some stones, and fling them at him, whenever you've the chance; for if he turns to the deep water, he's lost."

With alacrity Master Tom armed himself

with the missiles, and, imitating the example set by the accomplished Mike, he hurled them with equally good intent, if not with such dire effect, as his more able companion.

The intervals now became much shorter between the otter's showing his whiskered jaws above the surface and his disappearance beneath. Safeguard's energies were such as to give him but little time to inflate his exhausted lungs, and he found the pursuit so hot, that scarcely was the opportunity afforded him to breathe, than down he had to go again, in order to save himself from the close tug of his watchful enemy.

"What a big un!" exclaimed Mike, as the otter, for the first time, showed the length of his body and swam swiftly along on the surface, in spite of well-directed cudgels and stones flying around and about him, and the yells of Mike and Master Tom, and the fierce struggles of Safeguard to gain upon him. "He's the largest," continued he, "that I ever

saw, and that's saying a great deal for one among so many."

The hound, finding that he was no match for the otter in speed while skimming away in this fashion, broke from the water, and racing along the bank, dashed again at his prey, upon gaining its head, and down the poaching thief was forced, sorely against his will, to drive a hundred bubbles upwards, sparkling and bursting as they rose.

"He can't live!" shouted Mike. "He can't live."

In a spot much wider than the stream generally was, and clear from rush and weed, the otter rose lightly as a cork; but to the astonishment of Mike, with his head towards the hound, and perfectly motionless. With pricked ears and starting eye-balls, Safeguard stretched his limbs and struck gallantly out; and, as he neared his victim, he snapped his long white fangs, as if in anticipation of the pleasure of fixing them deeply in his loins.

"Look out, Tommy!" said Mike, jumping into the water behind the hound, "I know what he is after. He'll double back to the deep, if we don't have a care, and then we shall lose him."

"What shall I do?" asked his companion;
"just say, Mike, good, kind, old Mike!"

"Your best to keep him for'ards," replied Mike; "all ye can—everything," continued he; "but nothing in particular."

Beating the water with his stick, and making as much noise as he was capable of, he flattered himself with the pleasing hope that the object of pursuit might be kept back; but all his exertions were in vain. No sooner did Safe-guard approach the otter within some half-dozen feet, than, like a flash of light, he streaked downwards under the very body of his enemy, and darted in the now clouded and muddy stream past the unconscious person of the saturated Mike.

"I think," cried he, "that he's gone up."

“ Yes, there he is,” added Master Tom, pointing to a thick clump of rushes, among which he caught a glimpse of the otter as he rose again for air.

“ Run, run!” hallooed Mike. “ Get before him on the ford, Tom! Never mind wetting your feet!”

Away ran the boy; but, heedless of the shallow to which Mike alluded, he jumped into the river in a truly dangerous depth, for one so short of stature; and down he sunk like a pebble, leaving nothing to give note of his immersion, but the straw hat—a recent thatch to his nut-brown curls—dancing on the disturbed and waving water. Buoyantly, however, he rose; and, as the drowning catch at straws, he grasped at some withered sedges just within his reach.

“ Hold on!” shouted Mike, seeing the perilous situation of his companion, and flying to his rescue. “ Hold on, Tom, in the name of—”

Abruptly was Mike's exclamation broken off, by Master Tom's suddenly becoming again lost to view. The few weak rushes in his hand broke, one by one, and then under he dipped, like a thing of much greater weight.

"He'll be drowned!" gasped Mike; "for I can't swim any more than a brickbat," he continued, clasping his hands, and meditating a reckless jump into the stream. Up came the object of his solicitude, as if some charitable spirit, dwelling beneath the rippling stream, had lent her aid to eject him from it. Clinging to a prickly bramble, overhanging the water, Mike threw himself forwards, and, catching Master Tom by a heel, drew him out with little less ceremony than he might have observed to a half-drowned puppy.

"Can ye speak?" said he, placing him upon the bank, and bending over the apparently inanimate body with more interest, perhaps, than he had yet entertained for anything quick or dead; "can ye speak, Tommy?"

After two or three sighs and sobs, the boy regained something like consciousness; and although his cheeks were blanched and his lips wore an ashy hue, he smiled, and answered faintly, "Yes, Mike, I shall be better presently. Don't——"

"Don't what?" rejoined Mike, placing an arm under his head, and raising it; "don't what, Tommy?"

"Don't wait for me," added his companion. "Stick to the otter, Mike, and kill him, if you can."

"You're a game little chicken, that you are," returned the attentive Mike; "but I must wait for ye, Tommy."

"No, no," said the boy. "Go on: I'll follow you presently."

At this moment Safeguard was seen sweeping through the water, breast high, and dashing the spray in showers about and above him.

"He's pressed him upon a shallow," said

Mike, enthusiastically, "and with the help of a mouse he'd kill him."

"Let's give it him, then," replied the boy, staggering to his feet. "Let's give it him, Mike."

"Can ye stand?"

"And run, too, in a minute," added his companion, with a bold spirit of his young nature thrilling through the blood, quickly and warm, and making him feel equal to more, much more, than he was capable of.

"There's steel for ye!" exclaimed Mike, giving the boy a hug of admiration. "Come along, then," he continued; "but mind and don't get into one o' them holes again."

Making the best of their way to where Safe-guard was exerting his energies to pull down his victim, they soon joined the chase again; and the ardour of it dissipated all the chilling influence which the accident to Master Tom occasioned.

Life is as precious to the spider, as to that superior and forked animal, ambitious and

CHAPTER IV.

“ A hungry, lean-faced villain ;
A mere anatomy, a mountebank ;
A thread-bare juggler, and fortune-teller :
A needy, hollow-eyed, sharp-looking wretch ;
A living dead man : this pernicious slave,
Forsooth, took on him as a conjurer.”

IN a green lane, flanked by two high and sloping banks, on which the prickly bramble and sloe-bush flourished, with many a flower born to bloom unseen, a man was industriously engaged in the humble occupation of razor-grinding. He was old, and, if his habiliments and general appearance offered any evidence of his means and resources, poverty-stricken in the extreme. A darned, tattered, and faded soldier's coat, bereft of its skirt, and which

now, in its curtailed state, came under the denomination of a spenser, hung upon his shoulders, and seemed as much disposed to drop from them as to remain in its doubtful position. His legs were barely protected from the glance of the passer-by in a pair of trousers frayed almost to the knees, and his feet were scarcely capable of forming a union with the soleless and dilapidated shoes in which their owner shuffled on his way. A worn and greasy foraging cap placed jauntily on one side of his head, almost as devoid of hair as the back of his brown and bony hands, completed his unprepossessing costume; but notwithstanding its lack of attractions, there was an air about the wearer which gave note that he had seen far better days, and afforded more than a probability that he had known how battles were lost and won. His features were hard and contracted, and his gray eye-brows sprouted in thick wiry bristles over a pair of as bright and twinkling eyes as ever glistened in human

sockets. Deeply marked and wrinkled were his cheeks ; but from his iron frame, still well-knit with thews and sinews, it would seem that hardship and suffering had more to do with the stamps than the sap-consuming hand of Time.

Quickly he turned the wheel of his machine, and the sparks flew as he held against the stone a pair of rusty and blunt scissors which he was endeavouring to whet to a keen edge. Now and then he stopped the bur-r-r of his work to examine the effects of his progress in the task, and after trying the edge of the instrument on the sensitive and fleshy part of his dexter thumb, he renewed his labour.

In a gleam of sunshine streaming on a patch of rank grass, some three or four yards from the itinerant sharpener of a diversity of domestic tools, a bobbed tail, wiry Scotch terrier squatted. It must be confessed, in the graphic language of an eminent dealer in the canine race, that he looked "a varmint." More

refined diction would not convey an apt description of this constant companion of the razor-grinder. Short, crisp, and staring was each hackle upon his body, which in colour combined the hue of a grimy brown and an undecided black, not dissimilar to an impenetrable London fog. His ears had been clipped to a sharp point, and the ornament to his rear docked to the only joint remaining. His front legs were unproportionably less in length than his hind ones, and were so immeasurably bandy, that more than once a cat, or some such object of attack, had slipped between them, in doubling from his evil intentions of committing grievous bodily harm. And what was the creature gifted with life that he would not attack? From a bull to a butterfly he was ever ready to tilt, and, indeed, run a-muck at everything that he might meet. To growl and snap at the fleeing legs—although slow in flight withal—of an old woman, as he trudged through a village, gave him special gratifi-

cation; and as he returned to the side of his master, who conceived a secret pleasure at this delinquency, equal to the apparent one of his favourite, the last remains of his tail would wag with a demonstration of delight inadmissible of doubt. Then to set a group of children squalling, or to fix his fangs in the ear of a truant pig, was unsurpassable diversion; and whenever these legitimate objects of his pleasures were wanting, he consoled himself with the less exciting occupation of barking at vacancy with a power of incredible magnitude. In truth, the intervals were few and far between when this unexampled dog was not using his best endeavours to render himself as superlative a nuisance as his many accomplishments made him capable of.

Like many a wiser man—although he had the character of being a 'cute body for many a wide mile around—the razor-grinder entertained a dangerous habit of holding loud communion with his own thoughts. Had it

not been for the watchfulness of his four-footed friend, more than once these intended private conferences with the inward man would have betrayed the holder of them to other ears than those for whom they were designed. However, the footfall of a grasshopper could not escape the vigilance of Toby, and hitherto no unfortunate result had followed. It was also a custom of Toby to give a response, by way of parenthesis, to these self-communications of his master; and, notwithstanding their being unnoticed by him directly as a reply, they were not without their effect.

"I don't know," observed the razor-grinder, for the fiftieth time trying the edge of the scissors under his immediate revision, "I don't know," repeated he, "but I think you'll do."

Toby sneezed an acquiescence.

"And if I don't mistake," continued his master, "when I take ye home in the cool of the evening, I shall be able to sack one of

the gossip's chickabiddys, and may be the one that roosts next the cock."

Toby gave a strongly indicative wag with his abrupt terminus, upon the policy of this measure.

"Ah!" resumed his owner, giving a pat of satisfaction upon his abdominal regions, "I always choose the best when I've the chance in all matters; but more particularly when eating and drinking are concerned."

Toby threw himself upon the flat of his back, and rolled in very ecstasy at the sentiment.

"Some folk," continued the razor-grinder, shaking his head with pity at the reflection, "some folk are nincompoops enough to let the best—the pick of the fruit as I call it—slip through their fingers; but *I* never do. No, no: trust Peter Parkins for that."

Toby skipped nimbly to his feet upon the conclusion of this sentence, and scratched an ear, as if it had been tickled by the facetiousness of the remark.

"A man must be worse than a hass to stick his beak into skim milk when he's the opportunity of moistening his chalk with cream," said the soliloquizing Peter, again making the sparks fly from the rough stone as he whirled it swiftly round; "and yet," recommenced he, "go where you will—hang me if it isn't enough to make one's eyes sore!—you'll see swarms of addle-pated, half-asleep, never-awake, blinking, winking, dreaming fools, who never can tell until it's too late—until what I may call it's *digested* nourishment—which side their bread was buttered on."

Toby expressed a perfect agreement in this metaphysical opinion concerning the short-sightedness of human kind, by giving a slow and deliberate wink of approval.

"Poor beggars!" exclaimed the razor-grinder, after a long pause, and thus with pity he concluded his reflections.

Scarcely were they brought to so desirable

a close, when Toby announced, by a short inward growl, that some one or something was in the order of coming, and quickly afterwards a long shadow was cast upon the greensward close to the feet of Peter Parkins.

"As the old gossip said when she crossed the door,
'Coming events throw their shadows afore,'"

chanted Peter, in perhaps the least melodious tone that elegant metre from the muse was ever murdered in.

"What, Mike!" continued he, catching the virgin glimpse of the substance from which the shade was cast; "what, Mike, my heart-of-oak, my spurred and crowing cock! How wags your luck?"

"Kindly, master, kindly," replied Mike, at the same time repelling Toby's self-imposed task of minutely inspecting his person, by kicking him unceremoniously into a neighbouring bed of thistles.

"That's very frequently the reward of an

inquiring mind," observed the philosophical razor-grinder, pointing to the discomfited and floored Toby. "Only try to shell the pod of circumstances, and over ye go like a rag from the foot of prejudice."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Mike, giving a full view of every tooth in his wide and distended jaws. "What! you're still at your old trade of keeling the pot o' your learning."

"Taking down the shutters of mole-eyed ignorance," replied the razor-grinder, crossing his arms, and coughing like an orator at fault; "or," continued he, "in words that the least gifted in common sense may understand, putting an edge upon blunt and rusty minds, has always been one of my pleasing, but sadly unprofitable labours—at least," said he, correcting himself, "in an *earthly* point of view. What it may do when Peter Parkins's tally comes to be reckoned up hereafter, and the score squared, is a matter beyond the reach and itching fingers of the wisest."

At the finish of Peter's religious response, he cast a look upwards, which was accompanied by one from Toby to the same quarter and altitude; and if it lacked an equal expression of piety, still there was a fair assumption of the virtue, even if he had it not.

"If ever there was a spoiled parson," rejoined Mike, taking a seat upon a convenient ledge in the bank, and resting his elbows upon his knees, and his chin upon his thumbs, "if ever there was a spoiled parson," repeated he, "you're the mistake."

"I've been told before," added the razor-grinder, "that I was designed for the high road of life, instead of the bye-path necessity has forced me into."

"Most persons hang their hats upon the same peg," returned Mike. We all have a fancy that if our deserts brought their proper change, our pockets would be better lined."

"If my recollection serves me rightly," re-

plied Peter, "those were my very words when I was here last winter,"

"Oh! of course," rejoined Mike, with a sarcastic laugh. "Oh! of course," repeated he: "it would cut roughly against your grain to let a good thing go unclaimed."

"You're a sharp boy, Mike," responded the razor-grinder, "and *can* say a neat thing, thanks to your acquaintanceship with me."

"Well," said Mike, rising and stretching himself; "when my respect for myself becomes flabby, I'll come to you for starch."

"Ah!" ejaculated Peter; "never let the opinion you hold of yourself want for buckram. It's the worst act a man can do against himself, Mike—mark my words—to let the gum out of the notions concerning your own superiority. Once begin to think yourself a leetle bit inferior to your fellow-passengers, and I'll suffer my head to be chopped off by a hand-saw if you don't soon find yourself in the dickey."

"I believe that," replied Mike, jerking his

hat on the end of his nose, and taking a stride or two in a semicircle. "Yes, yes; that's the way to be shoved into the back seat, and no mistake."

"I'm right glad to hear you say so," rejoined the razor-grinder, pleased with Mike's acquiescence. "Upon my honour—"

"Upon your what?" interrupted Mike, suddenly throwing his sadly damaged hat upon the extreme back part of his head, and opening his eyes like one amazed at some astounding sound. "Upon your what?"

"Honour!" added the razor-grinder, placing his right hand upon the left of his breast.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mike. "Ha, ha, ha! Whenever I hear a chap talk of his honour, I always suspect that he's hard up for security!"

"And if pinched in that respect," returned Peter Parkins, "I don't think *you* in a situation to bark for triumph."

"True; quite true," responded Mike, some-

what humbled by the reminiscence of his corresponding condition.

Upon this admission, the razor-grinder felt that he had gained a victory over his companion in the keen encounter of their tongues; and after indulging in an inward laugh, which sounded not unlike the smothered cackle of a frightened barn-door fowl, he placed the finished scissors in his pocket, and, taking a seat upon one of the handles of his portable machine, seemed to be engaged, for a few moments, in scrutinizing the features of his companion.

"Am I grown handsome since you last saw me?" inquired Mike, almost raising a blush under the steady gaze of Peter Parkins.

"Why, in respect of beauty," replied he, "you're just about the same. The gals are not likely to tear a great deal of muslin into rags about ye."

"The gals!" hallooed Mike; and then he laughed so long and loud, that even the bold Toby quailed at the sound, and slunk, with

the abridgment of his tail pressed close to his rear, between the legs of his master.

"But do you know, Peter"—continued Mike, upon gaining a conclusive check upon his boisterous mirth, and as he spoke he dropped his voice to a whisper—"that *I* love the gals, although I never could get one to, what I may call, give a tat for the tit in this sentiment; they're all so shy of me: and fly away like so many sparrows at a charge of dust-shot, whenever I'm in sight."

"I'm not surprised at that," replied the razor-grinder.

"Because, you'd say, I'm so ill-favoured—"

"Say ugly!" interrupted Peter Parkins. "I love plain English when speaking of plain subjects."

"And I'm a precious plain one, it would seem," said Mike, dolefully; "although when I've seen my phiz—by some called a mug—in a pool or a pond, I've thought worse might be found in a day's march."

"Oh, yes!" replied Peter, rubbing his hands briskly. "Oh, yes! to be sure! There was a man I met only yesterday, without a nose, and squinting eyes: in a matter of comparison he was worse."

Mike felt that this was a side-winded compliment, and intended as an additional blow to his vanity.

"I suppose," resumed Peter, "that since you've become an admirer of petticoats, you feel the value of bird-lime to catch 'em with?"

"Perhaps I do," returned Mike, in an abstracted tone; and while he spoke, he gave a short respiration, which sounded like a sigh from an unpractised bosom.

"By all the saints!" ejaculated the razor-grinder. "By all the saints!" repeated he; "you're in a bad state, Mike."

"Bade state!" said Mike, while an unusual quantity of blood appeared to be pumped into his face, until it was as scarlet as a newly-scraped brick. "What do you mean?"

Peter Perkins pointed a straightened finger in a direct line towards his companion, and hissed these ominous words in an accompanying ominous manner—"Mike, a crook's round your neck!"

"If there is," replied Mike, stammering for an apt answer. "If there is, it's better than a halter."

"I'm not prepared to agree with that all at once," rejoined the razor-grinder, with an air of a man who not only valued his own opinion greatly, but expected others to do so. "I can't be soused head over ears in hasty conclusions," continued he: "I must be led to such results, as them pippins give a flavour of, slowly and by degrees."

"Da——"

The intended curse was unfinished in its mutter, and the recording angel of the sins of men dropped the pen when about to debit another item to Mike's already long account. The suppression, however, was not lost upon

Peter, who, noting the quick advancement of his friend's choler, perceived the expediency of changing the subject without delay.

"Is there any thing new in the wind that fills the bubbles of your fate?" asked the razor-grinder, taking from some obscure and hidden corner of his bosom an exceedingly greasy, crumpled, and faded pack of cards. "I see," continued he, stooping from the poetical to the matter-of-fact, "that you've a new pair of shoes to your feet."

"There's certainly a cap-full of fresh air," replied Mike, regaining the equanimity of his temper. "I've a regular-built service now, and yet remain my own master."

"What's that?"

"I'm earth-stopper to Squire Lawrence," rejoined Mike, "with a salary of twelve shillings a-week."

"That's a very nice kind of service," returned Peter Parkins, drawing the air through his teeth with the indication of a relish.

"What a chance you must have for perquisites!"

Why, yes!" said Mike, applying his fingers as a comb to his combined and matted locks; "one can pick up a hare, and wire a pheasant without much risk, now and then."

"The opportunities must be famous," rejoined the razor-grinder in a tone of admiration. "I only wish the chance was mine."

"I sometimes take advantage of it," returned Mike; "but I know the difference between using and abusing my trust,"

"Do ye?" added Peter shuffling the cards through his fingers. "Then, all I've got to say is, that you've learned a lesson too difficult for the greater number of common understandings."

"What are you going to do with those devil's books?" inquired Mike, as his companion began to place the cards in rows upon the ground.

"To show you a new branch of trade," replied the razor-grinder; "and the most profit-

able one, take it all in all. As I told ye once before," continued he, "when I got my discharge from the army—"

"Drummed out of the regiment, you mean," interrupted Mike.

"If you like the unvarnished truth better," resumed Peter, not in any way moved at the unpleasant refreshing of his memory. "I took to asking favours of the public."

"Begging," briefly chimed in Mike.

"I see that you like plain language," rejoined the razor-grinder. "But I soon found," he continued, "this to be a shocking bad return for my labour. People can't bear to be charitable, unless it's known to their neighbours; and that's the reason, you may be sure, gifts to the poor are always made soft soap in praising the rich. There's a small matter of good done in this world, without a better return being expected."

Toby had been a patient listener for some time, without in any way joining in the argu-

ment; but he now thought it high time to participate in the discussion, for fear that his non-interference might be attributed to incapacity. He therefore opened his jaws as wide as possible, and conveyed, in as positive a yawn as an ill-mannered dog ever gave in any grade of society, that he was excessively tired with the prosy matters under consideration, and that he wished them brought to a hasty conclusion.

“ Finding my new profession a decided failure,” said Peter Parkins, without noticing the slight interruption from Toby, except by a just administration, tempered with mercy, of his toe to the rude caviller’s seat of sensitiveness, “ I took to the appropriation of general effects, without being mindful of a legal or equitable consideration.”

“ Prigging ! ” pithily remarked Mike.

“ This,” resumed the razor-grinder, “ I soon learned to be an objectionable calling, if practised by itself.”

"A month at the mill convinced you o' that, I'll be bound," observed his companion.

"Yes," replied Peter; "I found it most unanswerable evidence of the preconceived fallacy. However," continued he, "I quickly discovered what was wanted to mix with the occupation, in order to render it safer to the practitioner, without a reduction of a half per cent. in the profits. With the small capital that I possessed, I made an investment in this simple piece of mechanism: and thus I was enabled to scour the country round, under the appearance of an honest calling, without being longer subjected to the pains and penalties of the laws framed for the exclusive benefit and compulsory penance of vagabonds."

"The cage and the stocks," said Mike, by way of an explanatory parenthesis.

Peter Parkins gave a nod, and proceeded; while Toby seemed to be settled down into a doggish, surly silence.

"Now, *grinding*," said he, emphatically,

"is like most of the other pursuits in life ; it isn't exactly all what it seems to be. There are wheels within wheels, and secrets of the craft not open for every peeper's eye."

"I think I know what they are," replied Mike, with confidence.

"You're a shrewd lad," rejoined Peter Parkins, "and perhaps may give a likely guess. But to save you the trouble, I'll just tell ye. Every turn, either by design or accident, that can be twisted or cramped to one's own account, must never be lost sight of."

"And that's the reason, I suppose, you sack the poultry, and pick up a silver spoon or so, when you go to folk's houses for the make-belief of sharpening scissors and such like articles," returned Mike.

"*Pre*—cisely so," added Peter. "And so you see," he continued, "that the ostensible purpose in my profession is exactly similar to those of a more lofty description—to appear honest, and all that sort of nonsense, when roguery is

the main-spring of the machinery after all is said."

"But what has this to do with those cards you're thumbing over there?" asked Mike.

"You always were impatient," responded the razor-grinder, in the most imperturbable manner that can be conceived by the coolest of blood, "and impatience is a very objectionable quality. However, as I was about to say, I entertain—as I think I have before said in one of our former meetings—a strong affection for the very best victuals—and especially good drink—that can be cooked, brewed, or distilled. With regard to my wardrobe," continued Peter, glancing carelessly at his tattered garments, "I'm not particular to a shade; but," and then the speaker smiled blandly, "as to my internal lining, I *am* nice—very nice. Well! for a supply equal to the demand, I found the *ready* seldom at hand, even with all the industry I could use."

"In the prigging and grinding line," added Mike, with a nod of comprehension.

"And so," said Peter Parkins, resuming his subject, "I resolved to open another branch of trade. For a man living above his means is sure to find his circumstances in the long run not dissimilar to his corns in a tight shoe—the pressure will pinch him."

No doubt o' that," rejoined Mike.

And what do you think this new branch of trade is?" inquired the razor-grinder.

"A rascally one, I'll be answerable," replied his companion, with unequivocal candour.

"Perhaps it is," rejoined Peter; "but I tell fortunes and cast nativities, as a make-up to my income."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mike; "ha, ha ha! What next, I should like to know?"

Those are precisely the words my customers put to me," added Peter. "When I've told them of a circumstance as sure to happen as an over-ripe apple is to fall to the ground: they say," continued he, in a mimic-

ing tone, "What next, I should like to know?"

"And you pretend to tell them?" observed Mike.

"If paid accordingly," replied the razor-grinder; "but it quite depends upon the fee."

Do you manage to pick up many crumbs at this game?" asked his companion.

"With love-sick lads and lasses I drive a roaring trade," returned Peter Parkins; "but they must be in love to bite freely; otherwise, they only nibble."

"But what you tell them is of course all"—and here Mike conveyed his meaning in the graphic manner of puffing an imaginary feather from the ends of his fingers.

"If you'll believe me when I've no object in telling a lie," replied the razor-grinder, without any affectation in the seriousness of his deportment, "I can, with these cards properly shuffled, dealt, and cut, tell many a

thing which the future must bring to pass. Mark me, not all the truth; but many a slip and shaving of it."

"How?" said Mike.

"Ah!" exclaimed Peter Parkins, turning his eye upwards, and shaking his head, "that's a puzzler. *How* has made many a brain giddy; and yet it may seem too easy for the exercise of an infant. I can't tell how these cards reveal some of the secrets of futurity; and yet I know that they do it."

Mike expressed his incredulity by commencing a loud and merry whistle.

"Doesn't the earth turn round, and the sun rise and set?" said the razor-grinder, warming upon his subject. "Don't the wind blow, and the rivers run, and the tide ebb and flow? and can you tell me *how* they do so?"

"That's a fact," replied Mike, losing many grains of his opposed belief, "and I like facts, when they come home to one;" and, as he

spoke, he administered a hearty thwack upon his breast.

"Then, by the same rule," rejoined Peter, "if you—as I understand—admit these effects, without knowing the why or the wherefore, tell me by what logic ye can gainsay others on account of their causes being hidden and mysterious?"

"You talk like a book," returned his companion, "and always did, since my acquaintanceship with you."

The razor-grinder felt flattered at this compliment, and his overweening vanity was fanned by perceiving that Mike was completely silenced in the discussion.

"Do you now," stammered Mike, after a thoughtful pause, "do you now think that you could tell a chap what would be his latter end?"

"Maybe that I could," replied Peter, with a concealed laugh quivering his nether lip.

"Will ye just try, then?" returned Mike,

taking a seat on the unoccupied handle of the razor-grinder's machine, and stooping forwards, he looked at the cards closely as they were spread in rows upon the grass.

Peter Parkins extended the open palm of a hand and said, "In the first place, that must be crossed with silver."

"I luckily can do that," replied Mike, producing a bruised and battered thimble, which he had picked up in one of his journeys of search and discovery.

"No, no, rejoined Peter; "it must be crossed with money."

"In that case," added Mike, returning the wreck of the thimble to its obscurity, "I can't make the beginning."

"You're a 'cute, sharp lad," said Peter Parkins; "and, by way of a novelty, I'll be generous, and tell your fortune for nothing."

At this moment the deep note of a hound was heard in the distance.

"Hark!" cried Mike, springing from his seat.

Again the cry was audible, and soon afterwards a burst of many tongues came ringing on the breeze.

"They've found in Wotton-wood," continued Mike, and his eyes sparkled as he spoke; "and, if there's an open earth within a ring of fifteen miles, I hope I may be crammed into it and buried alive!"

"Sit down," said the razor-grinder; "sit down, and never mind the hounds."

"Sit," ejaculated Mike, "who can sit with that music in his ears?" and, without further observation, he climbed the straight, tall trunk of a neighbouring fir-tree, with about the speed and agility that a cat would use from the hot pursuit of a worrying cur.

"Where are ye going?" inquired Peter, astonished at the nimbleness of his companion.

"To join the sport," replied Mike, again sliding to the ground; "for I see that I shall be in time to get well away with them."

"When shall we see each other again?"

asked the razor-grinder, as his companion started off without the ceremony of taking farewell.

“Come to the kennel at nightfall!” shouted Mike.

“I will!” hallooed back Peter; and thus abruptly the two friends separated.

CHAPTER V.

"The skies, the fountains, every region near,
Seem'd all one mutual cry."

WITH his heart keeping time with his heels—and both were strangely quick in their respective actions—Mike swept through briar and brake, and cleared fence, rail, and ditch, and raced over fallow and mead, until he arrived at the outskirts of the cover through which the hounds were pressing the wary fox, in the ardour and spirit of their matchless breed. For where was there such a pack as the Squire's of the Range? True it is, that they were large and somewhat heavy in proportions; but nothing would induce their

owner to make the attempt of altering their form and figure. "No," he would say to a hint of modern improvement. "No: as I first knew them—and that was before I could climb into a saddle—so they shall remain. My father, and his before him, were better sportsmen than myself, and it would ill become me to change the blood." And then, indeed, if the Squire had listened with a favourable ear to the suggestion, what would Job Sykes, the huntsman, have said to the matter? Job was a queer old fellow, and regarded every opinion expressed in his hearing, about hounds and hunting, as nothing less than a positive insult. "As if *I* don't know every move concerning 'em," he replied, to a remote intimation that anybody might have the hardihood to give him, as what he ought to do, or what he ought not to do. "As if *I* wasn't up to every wrinkle! By the —, I expect we shall have a queer breed of folks presently—something between bull-dogs and sucking

Quakers!" Job was certainly anything but a patient man, and could not brook an affront, as he ever deemed it, of this nature. Thirty years had matured his experience as the huntsman to the Squire, and half that number he had passed in the noviciate state of whipper-in; for Job was now in the sere and yellow leaf of life, although, forsooth, there were many green branches yet on the sturdy, stalwart trunk. As he had been to his paternal progenitor, so Job's only son and heir, James Sykes, more commonly and familiarly called Jem, was the whip under his special training and guidance. For it was Job's greatest boast, that the Sykeses inherited, in regular succession, the post of honour that he then so ably filled; and he frequently pointed, with gratified vanity, to a row of very questionable portraits, hung in a line upon the wall of his snug cottage, as the likenesses of his departed ancestors; who aired in the saddle, figuratively speaking, that he now had the

pleasure of sitting in. There were two of these said pictures that caused an invariable rise in Job's cachinnatory powers whenever his eyes fell upon them. They certainly must have been strange-looking originals, if the professed semblances were, in the remotest degree, worthy of credit. A bunch of powdered hair, as thick as their arms, was tied at the end with a large bow of black riband, and this reached to a little below the middle of their spines: waistcoats of the brightest scarlet reached within a narrow width of the knees of their buckskin breeches; and at this point, some dozen or more stripes of riband were fastened, so as to dangle and flutter, in the form of streamers, nearly to their ankles: above their top-boots, which were pushed as low as the creased leather would permit, a gap and intermediate space was left to show the knitted hose; but although this gave an air of negligence, yet there was a study even in the carelessness: the long ends of the white

cravats that were tied in narrow bands round their necks were allowed to remain on the outside of their waistcoats; and, taking them altogether, these prototypes of the departed Sykeses alleged that the originals must have been eccentric images of the human form divine. There was a peculiarity, too, about the present representative and head of the family, in his outward man, that would lead a reflective mind to think that the quaintness of exterior in the Sykeses had not been buried and entombed in oblivion. Job was quite "a character" in his costume and general appearance. He was never known to be without his boots and spurs within the memory of the oldest of his neighbours and acquaintance, except, if the narrative must be in strictness of the fact, by the respected and respectable Mrs. Sykes, in the black and stilly hour of night. No matter when or where—even on the flagged aisle of the church, when Job went to confess his sinful omissions and commissions, the clank

of his spurs was heard ; and upon one occasion, being questioned as to the motive of his thus going barbed in the heel upon all occasions, he proudly replied, like a knight of old, that " he considered he was entitled to 'em." Not that Job was a figure on which pride would sit at ease. His legs were remarkably short, while his body was as particularly long, although his stature was under the ordinary one of men in general. Of his features, not even an enemy—if he possessed one—but would admit, if in proper dread of adding to his sinful account, that they were singularly regular ; and for one whose locks were bleached by age, few handsomer could be found than those in the possession of Job Sykes. Not a single bristle was permitted to sprout upon his ruddy cheeks ; and so smoothly shaved was his chin, and every part of his face whereon a hair gave evidence of vegetation, that, for aught to any appearance to the contrary, he might have been as beardless as an unfledged youngster.

Good humour sparkled in his eyes; and although a spirit of determination was expressed in his thin and compressed lips, yet it was seldom that a smile was not engaged in the struggle of separating them. And then, in the garments that adorned his person, how superlatively clean was each and all! From the snowy roll of cambric (the very centre and essence of Mrs. Sykes's ambition), twined with the greatest care about his throat, in which was invariably stuck a gold horse-shoe of gigantic size, to the boot polished like a mirror upon his foot, not a thing, not a button, not a thread but was free from sullying dirt as industry, soap and water, and friction, could render them. Self-opinionated Job certainly was, and exceedingly sensitive upon subjects connected with his occupation; but, notwithstanding this, he seldom expressed a hasty observation in the hearing of those who occasioned a flutter in his temper by some ill-timed and unnecessary remarks; although he often, as he

said, damned them heartily between his teeth. Thus keeping the irate sparks of his anger from flying from his tongue, his offences were few and far between ; and Job not only became a favourite with all who knew him, but he had the greater advantage of continuing one. With the Squire, from his youth upwards, he had always been more like a companion, albeit a humble one, than a servant ; and never, notwithstanding the familiar terms in which they addressed each other in the field, was respect deeper than that entertained by Job towards his excellent and well beloved master.

Upon Mike arriving at the verge of Wotton-wood, and just as he was about mounting a tree to take a hasty survey of the proceedings, he was hailed by the Squire.

“ Your servant, Sir,” deferentially replied Mike, unclasping his arms from the tree, and hastening towards the spot where the Squire stood mounted on a superbly-shaped and steady hunter.

"Are the earths closed in the Gullyhole-gorse?" asked the Squire.

"Every one o' them, Sir," replied Mike, taking off the remains of his hat; "but," continued he, turning his quick ear to the quarter of the cover that the hounds were making for, "he'll not point for them."

"D'ye hear that, John?" asked the Squire, addressing his friend, who at this moment was engaged in buckling tighter the girths of his saddle upon a fat, round-quartered, short-legged, Roman-nosed, crop-eared, squabby cob.

If ever the spirit of ugliness was condensed in a quadruped, it was in this pet abridgment of a horse belonging to John Hardy.

John, after two or three powerful grunts, and a deepening of his complexion in the straining to effect his purpose, managed to press the tongue of the buckle into the desired place, and then offered the full front of his smiling, beaming countenance to the Squire, and replied, "No, Harry, I did not hear

anything except the very great confusion the hounds are creating at this moment."

"Mike," rejoined the Squire, "says that the fox will not point for the Gullyhole-gorse, as I thought."

"Indeed!" exclaimed John, remounting with great difficulty, from a preponderance of weight in the behind of his frame. "Indeed!" repeated he. "Goodness gracious, you don't say so?"

"He's for Snag-common, I think," observed Mike, still keeping a watchful ear to the working of the pack.

"Why, that's twenty-two miles from here," said John Hardy. "I cannot think of riding so far as that."

"He may not have the chance of getting the distance," replied the Squire, laughing.

"But he may," returned John, seriously, "and then where shall I be?"

"Nowhere," added the Squire; "that's a certainty."

"Precisely so," said John Hardy, with resignation approaching to piety, "and therefore I may as well remain where I am."

"I'll be your pad-groom, Sir," returned Mike, "and I think that I can lift ye there or thereabouts."

"Ay," added the Squire, "that you can. Hark!"

"Tally-ho, tally-ho!" rang wide and far, in a shrill and loud, yet musical voice, from the farthest end of the cover.

"Dear me, if that isn't Tom's voice!" observed John Hardy.

"That it is," replied the Squire, tightening his reins, and thrusting his feet more forwards in his stirrups; "and I'll be answerable the halloo's as true as the sun."

"No fear o' that," rejoined Mike, and he spoke with pride of his apt pupil in sports of the flood and the field.

Job's horn sounded like music from well-practised lips.

“ Come away, come away !”

“ Hoik halloo, hoik halloo !” cried the whipper-in, cracking his heavy thong ; but the gallant hounds flew more to the cheer than to the threat, and crashed through the furze like whistling bullets.

Then, with a bunch of noble fellows, Job dashed along, cap in hand, and coming to the spot where sly reynard broke from the thicket, he laid them on with a voice that made many a heart beat quicker than was its wont.

“ Hold hard,” cried the Squire, as a few of the young and ardent began to exhibit symptoms of impatience ; “ hold hard,” repeated he, “ let them get well at it.”

“ Upon my word,” remarked John Hardy, tugging upon his bridle rein, for Blossom, the squabby cob, was one of the most pig-headed, obstinate, hard-mouthed brutes that ever man exhibited his equestrian accomplishments across ; “ upon my word,” and John spoke in trepidation, “ it’s very difficult to

hold hard. Be quiet, Blossom. What do you mean, sir?"

Now, it would appear that Blossom had no particular meaning as the main-spring to his action, except the intention of rendering himself as decidedly annoying and disagreeable to his master as possible; for although he tugged with outstretched neck, and his head buried between his knees, yet he continued to back himself as fast as such a reversed movement would permit.

"I'll persuade him to different manners than those," said Mike, going to the rear of the perverse Blossom, and administering such a thwack with his cudgel upon his round quarters, that it sounded like a flail coming upon the naked plank of a barn-floor.

Unprepared for this species of persuasion, the squabby cob flew forwards, and as nearly sent John Hardy flying over his ears as well could be, without absolutely accomplishing the feat. John, however, by clutching his mane

with one hand, and seizing hold of the pommel with the other, managed to regain his equilibrium.

“ For’ard, for’ard !” cried Job.

“ Hark-away, hark-away !” responded the Squire, giving his horse his head, and on he stretched, with a speed that quickly made him a leader of the van, now thundering in his rear.

Mounted on a neat and pretty white gallo-way, with quill-tipp’d ears, and legs like willow-wands, John Hardy’s *protégé*, Master Tom, held the conspicuous position of riding side by side with the huntsman. From a whim of his patron that the costume was particularly conducive to health, he was dressed like a young Highlander, from Scotia’s rock-ribbed, cloud-capped soil ; and as he flew along in the spirit and hardihood of fearless youth, with his long brown curls dancing from under his close scull-cap, and his throat rivalling the bleached collar turned deeply over his shoulders, he looked more like a picture from the easel of some ima-

ginative painter than a creature of flesh and blood.

"Do you see how they settle to it?" said Job, pointing with his whip to the pack, as they rattled along in so close a body that a tablecloth might have covered the whole of them.

"Yes, Job," replied Master Tom, digging his heels into the flank of his pony, as they neared a ditch with a yawning gape. "Hie over!" shouted he, throwing out his whip arm, and clearing the obstruction with the ease that a pigeon would have winged across it.

"That's the way," observed the huntsman, "that's the way to ride straight to hounds. Never flinch, swerve, or crane; but cram them at it!"

Master Tom's blood rose and flushed his already crimson cheek at the eulogium, and he resolved, that during this day at least he would dim none of the glory already won.

Like a merry peal of bells, each tongue ringing under each, the hounds pressed the fox with

every nerve and sinew strained to gain upon his flight and pull him down; while he, with praiseworthy regard for life, as valuable to the rat as to the emperor, raced along on the pads of fear, determined that the victory should be to the swift, let fate decree it for him or against him. Now over the deep fallows he took his pursuers a merry bat, testing the soundness of their lungs and powers of endurance. Then away he went with increased speed over moor and mead, skirting the hill-tops, and dipping through the valleys, and flashing through wood and copse, without a check to the chase, or even a momentary puzzle as to the course he had taken.

"'Tis a burning scent," said Job. "I'll be sworn there'll be bellows to mend presently."

"The Squire holds his place," replied Master Tom, glancing round, as they entered a large open common.

"He!" exclaimed Job. "I should be mortally grieved if he didn't."

"Jem, too, is just behind him," returned Master Tom.

"Ay," added the huntsman, with the pride of a father, "Jem Sykes can be just where he pleases, except," said he, qualifying the inclination of his son, "before me. That would be out of the due course of events."

On went the hunt. Mile after mile was scoured, and left far behind almost as soon as gained. Fences, rails, bars, gates, banks, brooks, and ditches were cleared with the ease of thought by the select few, bold and daring in the course they took; but by far the greater number pulled up here and there, and were seen measuring the distance of the respective impediments by stretching themselves in their stirrups, and taking a look on the side of the barriers so fruitlessly desired to be passed.

"I can't do it," remarked one, shaking his head; "my horse is not up to the mark."

"If I only had my spurs on," observed another, turning the head of his eager and will-

ing animal from a leap that quailed the rider, but not the horse, "I shouldn't hesitate a moment. As it is, I must lift hard along the road, and try to nick in by an' by."

"Confound it!" exclaimed a third, "my nag here is blown already, and it would be madness to proceed any farther. When I go home," continued he, with well-assumed indignation, "I shall discharge my head-groom, for really he's had more than sufficient time to get my stud in condition."

Thus with excuses the many were compelled to say, "hold, enough!" while the choice spirits held their way with little less deviation from the course than a shaft from the good yew-bow of Robin Hood of yore.

The Squire, it should be stated, did not take everything as it pleased Heaven to send. There had been a time that he did so; but the day was gone when rude health and sinewy strength were constant attendants upon him; and he now depended more upon his judgment and

knowledge of the country over which his hounds scoured, than on his boldness. Not but that he could and did brush many a rasper that would have turned a younger and stronger man ; still prudence dictated his avoiding them whenever an opportunity presented itself.

"Dear me !" ejaculated John Hardy, arriving at the mouth of a drain, under the able pilotage of Mike, and coming to a dead standstill, "how am I to get over this?"

"Put him at it, Sir," replied his pad-groom, encouragingly ; "it isn't above a couple of feet or so, at most."

"I don't think it's more, certainly," rejoined John ; "but I fear I shall be thrown ; Blossom jolts so in his style of fencing."

"I'm sure you'll be all right, Sir," ventured Mike.

"Do you believe, *religiously* believe," returned John Hardy, with marked emphasis, "that I shall not find my nose grinding against the grass if I make the attempt?"

"I do," was Mike's firm reply, although he had secret misgivings as to its honesty.

"Then assist Blossom in the trial," added John.

This assistance, by the way, meant nothing more nor less than a vigorous drubbing in the rear from Mike's trusty staff, without an application of which Blossom would do and endeavour to do nothing that he was required.

"Hold teight, Sir," cautioned Mike, raising the weapon in a posture of immediate offence.

John fixed his hands as before in Blossom's luxuriant and flowing mane, and griped the saddle and ribs of the squabby cob with his knees and legs, and gluing his lips together, as if in desperate purpose fixed, he was prepared for the ordeal. Crack came Mike's cudgel; high, very high—to an unnecessary perpendicular, Blossom reared himself, and after effectually compelling his rider to slide out of the saddle upon his haunches, he gave an abrupt bounce forwards, and, by the sudden

counter-action, sent John Hardy scrambling upon the pommel.

"All right, Sir," shouted Mike, perceiving that his patron had, after a doubtful struggle, regained his balance. "All right, Sir," repeated Mike; "give him his head."

Running fleetly (for he could have out-atripped Blossom), Mike urged the self-opinionated cob to his best speed, and, what with opening of gates, lifting hurdles, tearing down rails, and making gaps, he managed to get John much closer to the hounds than, under ordinary circumstances, he might be supposed capable of being.

"Have you seen my friend Lawrence, lately?" inquired he, a little puffed for breath, as Blossom was bumping him, with a truly vindictive spirit, over a wide and rough common.

"The last time I saw him," replied Mike, "was as he cleared the woodlands; and the Squire did that in style."

"How so?"

"He flew that double line of rail you see there to your left, Sir," continued Mike; "an ox-fence we call it, and nobody but him, Mr. Sykes, and Master Tom, had the pluck to brush it."

"Did—did that boy have the hardihood to jump that?" stammered John.

"Indeed he did, Sir," returned Mike.

"Very good!" observed John, as if a resolution had been suddenly taken—"very good. Then, all I have to say is, that the next time I consent to his hunting, except I hold a leading rein, I hope I may be flogged."

Mike could not refrain from tittering at this determination on the part of John Hardy. There was something about it which seemed to please his imagination with a concealed but excessive relish; for he continued to laugh for many more steps than there are seconds in three minutes.

On the opposite side of the heath, there was

a deep and fertile valley, flanked by two steep and precipitous hills. Down this the fox had dipped, and, from some artful double or inexplicable cause, the hounds were at fault. Every one, however, was at work in the endeavour to hit the scent off; and, as Job remarked in the fulness of his confidence, "If the varmint hadn't sunk into the earth, it was a horse to a hay-seed that they found him again."

"Come, come," exclaimed John, in a triumphant tone, "they're checked, I see. Egad," continued he, "I love checks. They give one breathing time, and all that sort of thing."

"Ay, we're up to them again, now, Sir," said Mike, entertaining a visionary glimpse of a half-crown for his trouble in thus rendering such successful assistance.

John appeared to learn by sympathy, or by some such sensitive process, the thought and mental image raised in Mike's cerebrum; for without a single word passing upon the subject,

he dived a finger and thumb into the corner of his waistcoat pocket, and extracted the coin before referred to.

"There," said he, giving Mike the money, "take that, and at the end of the day you shall have another."

"Many thanks," replied the beneficiary, accepting the reward, "and I hope to deserve the promised addition, Sir, in what I may call the cool of the evening."

"Well, well!" rejoined John, "I've no doubt but you will."

The hounds now skirted the brow of the hill, facing the spot where John Hardy stood, sponging and mopping the trickling drops of perspiration coursing down his rubicund, fat, and chubby cheeks; and although they were mute, and every note of music of their tongues was stilled, yet, by the waving of their plumed sterns, and the greedy way in which each drew his dew-lapped jowl along, it was obvious that something leased their prefin'd and ex-

quisite senses, although of an uncertain nature.

"Let 'em alone," said Job, viewing the working of his darlings with the look of an enthusiast—"let 'em alone," repeated he, "they'll hit it off presently. Give 'em time, and they won't want a moment more than's as necessary as milk is to suckers."

Throwing up his head, a leading hound announced the conviction of his forethought by giving a deep, clear, and ringing cry.

"Hark, hark to Capable!" hallooed Job. "Hark to Capable. Hoik, hoik!"

Then Fearless, and Vexer, and Prudence, and Ruin, and Trimbush, and Valentine, flew to the unerring signal, and off the whole went like a flock of pigeons, again in the right track of their prey.

There was not a moment to be lost; for he who lost one could never retrieve it. Away, away! and scarcely had John Hardy sufficient time to take a refreshing sob of breath, when

not a hound nor a horseman was in sight, and even he strained an ear fruitlessly to catch the faintest sound of the far-gone chase.

"Come, Sir," said Mike, "we must be stirring, or we shall see no more of them."

"Bless my life!" ejaculated John Hardy, "this is the worst of fox-hunting. No sooner does one, by dint of great exertion, get with the hounds, than off they are again, no one can tell where or whither. Stir up Blossom."

Strong and vigorously Mike applied his weighty and knotty stick to Blossom's hide, and with the desired effect; for the squabby cob entertained a mortal dread of a repetition of the cause. In a surly, blundering, half canter, half trot, now threatening to pitch upon his nose, and then recovering himself only to slide upon his houghs, Blossom reached the bottom of the slope, where a hedge and a ditch of very moderate dimensions opposed themselves as a barrier to his course.

"Shall we turn him over?" asked Mike,

taking hold of John's stirrup, in order to assist him in dismounting.

"No," replied his patron, "I'll try it."

Mike's first syllable of expostulation died upon his tongue. He saw that John Hardy had determined to set his life upon a cast, and was resolved to stand the hazard of the throw.

"He can't take it as a standing jump," said Mike; "you must run him at it."

"A little impetus is wanted, is it?" returned John, settling himself in his saddle; and taking Blossom some dozen yards from the leap, he, assisted by Mike, drove him towards it with threats, cheers, kicks, thumps, and bruises and——

A giddy, indistinct, vapourish, misty confusion disturbed the placidity of John's brain, not unlike the hissing and bubbling of a bottle of effervescing lemonade; and when it had vanished, and clear defined consciousness became again resealed, John Hardy found himself upon the flat of his back, scanning the

ethereal and cerulean vault of heaven. With a complexion of an ashy hue he staggered to his feet just in time to see Mike catch the free Blossom, who had not experienced what unalloyed pleasure was until this unseating of his rider.

"Are you hurt, Sir?" inquired Mike, as seriously as his smouldering mirth would permit.

"No," replied John, with an elongated visage, "not much; but we'll go home. I'm quite satisfied with the sport." And with this he commenced retracing his steps slowly to the Range on foot, while Mike followed in the rear, dragging the sluggish Blossom after him, in the whole forming a somewhat spiritless and mournful procession.

Who can gainsay that it is a gallant sight to view a heart-stirring, soul-inspiring chase? The old and the young, the peer and the cottar, all feel its influence; and his blood must be thin, indeed, who does not find a glow within his veins at the musical discord.

“Hark! yes, here they come—here are the Squire’s hounds!” and then, despite of the stentorian lungs of the village schoolmaster, out rush the rebellious crew, whooping and hallooing like a troop of pigmy savages. The dreaded cane is rattled on the desk; “Come back!” thunders the pedagogue, looking fiercely and with dire intent over his spectacles perched upon his nose; and yet all is in vain. Not one but sets at naught and openly defies his authority. Old gossips, too, with tottering limbs, bestir themselves, and drop their knitting needles and stop the r-r-r of the spinning-wheel, to catch a glimpse of the merry passing scene; and although they shade their dim and bleared eyes with hard and shrivelled hands, yet, forsooth, they chuckle with inward glee, and enjoy the fun with not a jot less measure than those unruly school-boys there. Infants in their mother’s arms, struggled with outstretched limbs, and shrieked at the noise; and then, when all had passed, turned with

inquiring looks to their nurses. The plough-boy stopped his whistle, and the shepherd broke short the snatch of his quaint ballad, as the first sound of the approaching chase caught their ear, and when it came in view began to holla themselves hoarse as the croak of a jet-winged raven.

 Mile after mile had been scoured, and still the fox headed his enemies with unabated speed, and unflagging ardour, and they with equal determination followed in his wake. Notwithstanding, however, reynard's desperate attempt to render the distance greater between his brush and the jaws of the hounds, it proved to be beyond his power. Flee as he did, the ring of their tongues was ever in his ears. There was no time for him to try any of his cunning and contrivance to elude his pursuers. On he was pressed at ruthless haste, and but one minute's hesitation would have lost him every hope and chance of escape. Through deep and dark woods

he raced, trusting to find a friendly and open earth, but Mike's spade and pick-axe had clicked among the pebbles before the moon sunk in the broad light of, to him, this ill-fated day; and scarcely had he leisure to fly from the closed entrance, than the crash of the bush, twig, and underwood, announced the near coming of the pack. For now their ringing cry was stilled, save an occasional note from a leading hound to mark the road, and even this was given breathlessly. Thus the pursuing and pursued sped swiftly on, while the grains and atoms of the measure of duration were heaped upon the shores of time until the day began to sink upon the quicksand where ages lie buried and swallowed up.

"There'll be few to tell the end o' this," said Job to Master Tom, who still rode by the side of his stirrup, although the galloway had long since felt the smart switch from his rider, as a stimulant to his flagging exertions.

"No one's in sight," replied his companion, "except Jem."

"Of course he is," rejoined the huntsman. "A Sykes is never out!"

"But he's spurring hard, I see," returned Master Tom, glancing a look behind him at the redoubtable whipper-in.

"Then it's a toss-up if he sees the finish," added Job; "for when Kitty Clive wants the gafts, she must be all but blown to the last sob."

"Tally-ho! Tally ho!" shouted a voice not two hundred yards ahead.

"By Dolly and the devil!" exclaimed Job; "we're close to his brush now."

To the well-known view-halleo the hounds threw up their heads, and swept forwards, with a sudden rush, through a strong thickset hedge.

"The sooner a beaten fox is killed, the better," said Job, driving his rowels deeply into the flanks of his horse, and, bursting through the bullfinch like a flash of light, he

headed the hounds, and lifted them forwards with all the speed their long and fleet gallop had left in them.

"Tally-ho! Tally ho!" cried he, taking off his cap, and pointing to reynard, as he was creeping, rather than running, under a stone wall, with his brush dragged upon the ground, and his tongue hanging from his jaws, dead-beaten from exhaustion. The hounds viewed him in a moment, and each raced with his fellow to be the first in pulling him down.

"Who-whoop!" hallooed Job, exultingly, as Prudence dragged the fox backwards, in a faint and last attempt, in his clinging struggle for life, to gain the top of the wall; and then a score of eager jaws and greedy stomachs completed the work of death and annihilation.

"By the saints!" ejaculated Job, handing the brush to Master Tom, who almost wept for joy as he received the trophy. "By the saints!" repeated he; "you won it! and I'll say it now, although considerably spent for wind, that you'd

make many a fellow, longer in the leg, and fuller in the tooth, feel as if he'd been split up the back, and all the starch of conceit taken out of him : that's my opinion," concluded Job.

With this flattering compliment, Master Tom turned his pony's head towards the Range, not less proud than a hero crowned with laurel.

CHAPTER VI.

"Now it is the time of night."

IN the dark, deep shades of evening, the bat now flitted, and the lazy toad crept, croaking loudly to his mate. The glow-worm's lamp burned brightly from the moss, and the cricket was heard chirping from the hedge and thicket. Drumming through the air, the beetle hummed heavily along, and the screech of the owl drove many a mouse, trembling and afeared, back into its hole scooped in the old barn floor. Creatures who love the light had gone to rest, while those who live and revel in night's murky darkness, were now in the zenith of their pleasures.

Before the smouldering embers of a half-consumed faggot, Mike Crouch sat on his log, occupied, by way of pastime, in spinning, alternately, a couple of half-crowns from the nail of his dexter thumb. The broad pieces rung musically in the air, as their possessor jerked them up, and he seemed to be so completely absorbed in the task, that he paid no attention to a slight rustle which was made at the entrance of the kennel.

"Ho there!" cried a voice; "there's neither handle nor latch to this door: how do you swing it upon its hinge?"

"I'll show ye, Peter," replied Mike, rising from his seat, and with a single kick he sent the faggot, taking the place of a more legitimate door, spinning from the opening.

"That's the way, is it?" rejoined the razor-grinder, compelled to bow as he entered, accompanied by Toby. "Am I later than you expected?" continued he.

"No," replied Mike, pointing to a log for

his guest to be seated, while he replaced the fagot, so as to exclude the mist and chilling air. "No," repeated he; "I thought you would be here just as the toads began to croak: it's about your time."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Peter, squatting himself upon the log, while Toby stretched himself at full length between his master's legs; "these are my time-keepers, are they?"

"I've fancied so in your visits to me," returned Mike.

"Well," added the razor-grinder, "it's an hour when a great many eyes are shut, and one's movements not so likely to be noticed."

"That's true," said Mike, kneeling before the hearth and puffing the smoking sticks into a cheerful blaze; "and I'm glad you've come at this hour, for I wouldn't have it known in these parts that you were here to-night."

"Why?" briefly inquired Peter.

"As I told ye in the morning," replied Mike, "I hold service now under the Squire, and al-

though it's suspected that I'm the biggest rogue in this neighbourhood, no one can *prove* that I am."

Mike paused to blow the fire.

"Go on," said Peter Parkins, while Toby slightly raised his head from between his paws to listen to the reason.

"Now, it's not only believed," resumed Mike, "but every body *knows* you to be a rogue."

"There's not much ground left for a different conjecture," responded the razor-grinder, taking from his bosom a short black pipe, and cramming the bowl full of tobacco, which he carried, for convenience, in the crown of his hat; "and," continued he, "I'm not in the least ambitious of being considered in a different light."

"Nor should I," returned Mike, "except for my own ends to gain. But you see the difference there is between us: folks believe me to be a rascal, but they can't date their belief

from any particular act o' mine, while a dozen or more could be brought as marks against your tally."

Peter Parkins applied a lighted twig to the bowl of his pipe, and, after sending some dense volumes of smoke curling upwards from his lips, to roll along the naked rafters of the roof, replied, "There is the distinction between us two, that exists throughout the world between them who *take* their neighbour's goods, and those who are *caught* in taking them. One entails a probable suspicion: the other insures a certain conviction."

Toby was so moved with this philosophical reasoning on the part of his master, that he rose from the floor, and turning his back, so that the movement could be distinctly perceived, shook the stump of his tail in a most positive expression of approval.

"What a gift of the gab you have!" observed Mike, leaving the fire now that it flared and crackled brightly, and threw a cheerful light

around the walls of the kennel. "What a gift of the gab," repeated he, producing a bottle and a horn from some secret recess, or hidden nook, in the apartment, "you have to be sure!" continued Mike, finishing the sentence by drawing the cork with a loud and sudden pop, which acted remarkably well by way of a full stop.

"An orator, like a poet, must be born to the trade," replied Peter Parkins, emitting a stream of vapour from his jaws, that effectually threw the kennel into a thick, choking fog, "not apprenticed to it. What's the liquor?"

"Max," shortly replied Mike, gurgling a bumper of the fluid into a horn, and offering the dram to the razor-grinder.

Without blinking, winking, or coughing, or, indeed, evincing symptoms of any kind that the drink was any other than *aqua pura*, Peter poured the stinging spirit down his throat, and observed, as he took the cup from his lips, that, "if his mother had given him such nourishment

when an infant, he should like to have remained in her arms to this day."

His companion nodded an acquiescence to this sage and affectionate sentiment, and helping himself to an equally liberal allowance as he gave the razor-grinder, Mike drank, "success to our undertakings."

"Overtakings and middletakings, too, say I!" added Peter.

"With all my heart and voice!" returned Mike, refilling the horn, and draining it again to the addition made to the toast by his friend.

"There's nothing like an excuse for the glass," said Peter Parkins: "I should like to go on making 'em all day long, and the greatest part of the night, and for nobody to be able to refuse pocketing the affronts."

"So should I," returned Mike, giving his friend a second bumper; and, stretching himself upon his bed of badger skins, he seemed to be in no way an object of compassion, or in the least degree in want of what is generally termed,

in the language of meek, tender-hearted charity, the common necessities of life.

Small as it was, and abridged of those elegances of life which mansions of more imposing appearances for the most part possess, the kennel, notwithstanding, wore a snug, warm, and cheerful aspect. The bundle of dry sticks, fanned into a blaze by Mike's natural bellows, licked the chimney-back, and threw a dazzling light, not only about the walls, but through them; for many a crevice and cranny permitted the rays to stream themselves between the cracks and rents in the kennel. Leaning against the wall, for want of a back to his seat, opposite the fire-place, Peter Parkins sat with outstretched legs, blowing into a fume the sweet and narcotic weed, while Toby sprawled between them, basking in the warmth, and just maintaining that blissful dreamy consciousness between sleeping and waking. On the bed—hard and uninviting as it was—its occupier often had his eyelids closed by soothing sleep, when those on eider-

down courted the gentle expunger of mortal heartaches and feverish hopes in vain—Mike reclined upon an elbow, supporting his head, and regarding the reigning comfort of his dwelling with complacency, which, doubtlessly, was in no degree lessened by the horn and the bottle being placed upon the floor within convenient distance of his reach.

“ You didn’t say precisely why there was an objection to my being seen here,” remarked the razor-grinder, after a lengthened pause.

“ Oh !” replied Mike, “ merely on account of my not wishing to be seen keeping bad company.”

“ Is that all ?” rejoined Peter ; but it was not spoken like a question. “ There’s no accounting for some people’s prejudices,” continued he.

“ What luck had ye to-day ?” inquired Mike, without noticing his companion’s observation upon the cramped and contracted prepossessions of the reasoning faculties.

"Tolerably good," replied his companion;
"I ground two pairs of scissors, one knife,
and a razor, cast a nativity, told a couple of
fortunes, and prigged a pullet."

"Where's that?" quickly asked Mike.

"In my wallet," replied Peter, diving his
hand into a canvass bag slung across his
shoulders, and bringing forth an exceedingly
plump and tempting-looking fowl.

"It's a barn-door fed one," rejoined Mike,
taking the prematurely killed bird from the
hand of its destroyer, and weighing the dainty
morsel. "What a roast or a boil it would
make," continued he.

"Could you cook it now?" inquired his
friend, in a bantering tone.

"Ay," responded Mike with confidence;
"I'd venture a good ringing sixpence that
you'd say there's no mistake in my dishing up
savouries."

"Come, then," returned the razor-grinder,
waving his hand as a signal for Mike to com-

mence his culinary operations, "let's try it Set to work."

Without a syllable more upon the subject, Mike began diligently to strip the fowl of its plumage, and to prepare it for immediate dressing. In showers the feathers fell from his nimble fingers, and but a few minutes elapsed from the beginning of his labour, before Toby's lips began to water for the waifs set aside for his use and benefit.

"Plucking," remarked Peter Parkins, watching the skilful operations of his friend, "plucking," repeated he, "is an universal occupation. We all pluck. The rich pluck each other, and the poor pluck the rich. The ignorant pluck the learned, and the learned pluck the wise. The young pluck the old, and the old pluck——" the razor-grinder paused to blow a thin cloud, and as he turned his eyes to the ceiling, he seemed to be at a loss for an expression. "No," he continued, after some hesitation, "I don't think there is anything left

for the old to pluck, unless it be their memories."

"A precious lean bone that must be for their toothless gums," replied Mike. "But while we're upon this subject, I'll just mention a little matter that may—(nay, will, if well-managed)—turn up trumps for both of us."

"What's in the wind now?" asked Peter, pricking his ears forwards, and knocking the ashes out of his pipe, so that all his senses might be engrossed and drawn to a focus for the reception of the important intelligence.

"You've heard me tell the story of the little kid being sent in a hamper to the Range some years since," said Mike, by way of introduction.

"To be sure I have, over and over again," replied the razor-grinder, and he spoke rather fretfully, as if the tale was worn quite threadbare and stale. "Particularly," he continued, "if when a little the worse or a little the better for liquor. Persons have different opinions about this state and condition."

"Well!" resumed Mike, "like oaks springing from acorns, that shaving of a Christian has, by degrees, grown into a chip of immense importance in this district."

"You were always partial to talking in a roundabout, riddlemaree sort of a way," rejoined Peter, irritably. "Why don't ye speak plain?"

"I will," returned Mike, trussing the pullet. "Then you must know, that day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, since (according to Dame Woodley's belief) Master Tom's arrival from heaven in a hamper, he's been creeping into the favour of both the Squire and Mr. Hardy, until now he's looked upon as the next heir to the manor-house; for, as you know, the Squire is the last of his kith and kin."

"A loss to some is gain to others," said Peter Parkins.

"From being nursed in a cottage, this little windfall of chance," continued Mike, "is

looked upon and up to by the stiff-necked in these parts like one of themselves; and it would go hard with many—that is, in never more finding their legs under the black oak table at the Range again—if they attempted to saddle what I may call a slight upon him.”

“ I see,” remarked the razor-grinder, winking an eye, and giving a sage nod. “ It’s like a chap smoothing down the hackles of some old woman’s tabby or pug, when at the same time he longs in his heart to put his toe to their behinds.”

“ Just so,” replied Mike. “ But whatever the feeling may be, they daren’t show it. Now, I think, taking the country through, if a fatherless boy—as you’ll remember he was ticketed—ever deserved the pearl which has fallen into his mouth when yawning in a hail-storm, Master Tom is the chicken that ought to have it.”

“ I’ve heard you say so before,” remarked

Peter Parkins, "in the very same words, or my memory fails me."

Toby, too, exhibited a corresponding inclination to be wearied with the recital by giving a loud and palpable grunt of discontent.

"I may have said so before," resumed Mike, "but, like many a stanch hound, I'm obliged to hark back as a beginning to getting for'ard. I think that I've also informed ye"—and then he gave a short cough, which sounded as if forced and quite unnecessary—"that he's my godson."

Peter Parkins scratched his ear as if it had been strangely irritated. "To be sure ye have," replied he. "There's nothing new—or so little, that it amounts to nothing—in all this."

"It's coming," returned Mike, significantly, "the new cut's just about coming, Peter. Patience is about the best bitch in the Squire's pack, and I wish you to fancy yourself coupled

with her for a few minutes. As I was about saying," continued Mike, applying a flame to singe the flue from the stripped pullet, "that my godson, for some years, like a hundred children out of a hundred and one, was perfectly indifferent as to whose son he was, so long as his belly was well lined, and he felt himself comfortable in other respects. And notwithstanding Mr. Hardy endeavoured to find out, by offering ten pounds reward in great bills stuck on every wall and gate-post in the county, it never was found out, and never has been. Gossips talked, and many were the stories sent round about concerning the matter; but up to this day the mystery is just as thick as ever, and no one knows *that* of the truth;" and as he spoke, Mike blew a feather from the palm of his hand.

"Humph!" ejaculated Peter. "Go on."

"Curious as people were at the commencement," resumed Mike, "they soon found fresh subjects to make their tongues ring, and the

wonder lasted but long enough for another to take its place. Thus, like a shadow at sunset, it grew pale, and at last sank altogether."

"The night wanes," observed the razor-grinder, discontentedly, "and I'm hungry."

"You shall quickly have something to comfort your appetite," replied his companion, fixing a double piece of string to a skewer, which he had thrust through the fowl, and suspending it on a handy nail driven into a beam before the fire.

Giving it a twist, the prepared pullet spun round to a slow and approved movement, and the whole arrangement showed that the *artiste* was far from being an inexperienced one. Fresh wood was heaped upon the hearth, and in a few seconds there was every appearance of a speedy consummation to the razor-grinder's hopes respecting the nocturnal meal.

"Come, this looks like business," said Peter, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

Toby also appeared to think that it did; for

he sniffed the air with a keen sense of whetted expectation, and licked his lips with the salted relish of anticipation.

For a short time Mike was occupied in silently regarding the effect of his labours; and, being satisfied that no alteration was necessary in the arrangements, squatted himself again upon the bed, after the fashion of the Grand Sultan of the Ottoman Empire when sipping his coffee and smoking his hookah; but, at the same time, kept a watchful eye to the primitive spit.

"Let's hear the finish of your yarn," said Peter. "I suppose we haven't come to the end of the web yet."

"As I was saying," resumed Mike, "when a spoke was taken out o' my wheel, the sprout, if I may so call it, of Master Tom, was no longer talked of or thought of."

"What's his other name?" asked his companion.

"He was christened Hope," replied Mike;

"but I don't think I've heard him called by it more than twice in my life. Far and near he goes, and has gone, by the name of Master Tom."

"Go on," rejoined Peter, intensely wearied with the subject.

"Until lately," said Mike, "not a word has been spoken upon the probable nest he was hatched in; and who do you think has been raking up the old rubbish again?"

"Can't say," replied Peter.

"Master Tom himself," rejoined Mike. "Yes," continued he, clinching a fist, and throwing it out both swift and straight; "let Mr. Hardy, that—as Mrs. Woodley remarks of him—dear old angel, and saintly individual, say what he will, until he's lost his voice, (which he frequently does,) and let me, his godfather, say what I may, that boy cannot, will not rest, until he's informed who his father is, or who he was."

"'Oh!' said he to me, the other morning, when teaching him to tie a scarlet spinner;

‘ Oh, Mike, if I could only find out my father!’ ”

“ ‘ By the immortal Jingo!’ replied I, ‘ it must be a wise child to do that; and, although you’re no nincompoop, I’d advise ye not to make the attempt. Let the case bide as it does; you’ll not better it.’ To make a long story short, however, with his always scraping upon the same string, both Mr. Hardy and the Squire are bent, if possible, upon humouring him, and a search for Master Tom’s pedigree has again commenced. Advertisements are being put into all the papers, and a mint of money is being spent in this silly matter, doing little or no good to anybody. Now, I was thinking, after meeting you this morning—for you’re a deep old file, Peter—if we could manage to hook up a father, or something about a dead-and-gone one might be better, and thereby net the reward——”

“ What’s the sum?” interrupted the razor-grinder.

"A hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds!" repeated Peter Parkins in a tone of deliberation, as if weighing each sovereign comprising that amount. "It's worth thought and trouble."

"We should think so," replied Mike, drawing the breath between his teeth, "when sharing the swag."

"Share and share alike, I suppose?"

Mike nodded an assent.

"Then leave the business in my hands," continued the razor-grinder. "I'll chew it very fine in my thoughts; and, when well digested, you shall decide whether it's a good, oily, plausible plan or not."

"We must be as dark as the grave about it," observed Mike, seriously, "or our milk will be spilt, and no mistake."

"Never fear that," said Peter. "There's no foot-mark where I tread."

"'Tis the early bird that get's the worm," returned Mike; "and I often think the first

thought about a matter generally gets the best step. Have you, now, any idea," continued he, "as to what you'll do?"

"I think," replied the razor-grinder, pressing a finger upon his brow, as if notching a reflection in his brain, "I think," repeated he, bending forwards, and lowering his voice to a whisper, "that *I'll be his father!*"

CHAPTER VII.

“ With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine, y
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
Why should a man, whose blood is warm within,
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster ?
Sleep when he wakes ? and creep into the jaundice
By being peevish ? ”

THE wild, roving, fickle breeze sighed his tale to the stream ; for not a flower now offered its charms to his ruffling kiss ; and he hummed through the leafless twigs, and flapped and rustled the holly and ivy, and whirled the sere and withered leaf from the oak, and rattled old ricketty doors and casements, and puffed, occasionally, the smoke back again into yawning chimneys, causing many a gossip to

wheeze and cough, while spinning or knitting the goodman's winter hose by her cheerful hearth and homely fireside.

Among other primitive "Goodies" and funny old "Trots" who were thus interrupted in their labours, Mrs. Sykes, the better half, in a figurative sense, of Job the huntsman, numbered most conspicuously. Quickly she was plying her needles—the pace being a very fair match with her tongue, occupied in giving forth sentiments and aphorisms for the benefit of mankind in general, and of Job in particular—when a volume of dense black smoke belched forth from the chimney; some portion of it forcing itself spitefully down the throat of the loquacious dame, and bringing her to an abrupt terminus in speech.

Job, who was sitting in a snug corner, opposite to his wife, inhaling and exhaling the sweet narcotic fumes from his pipe, seemed in no way to entertain a feeling of sympathy for the threatened choking of Mrs. Sykes. On the contrary,

he appeared pleased at the effect of the cessation of her tongue, and recked little of the cause. Settling himself more deeply in a high-backed, elbowed, and well-stuffed chair, Job threw his ruddy, jovial face upwards, and, wafting a cloud of fragrant vapour, curling from his lips, he mingled a fervent prayer with it, that Mrs. Sykes might continue to cough for the remainder of the evening.

Now, it must be stated in justification of Job's apparent lack of humanity, that he had most cogent reasons for this petition. Mrs. Sykes was an excellent wife, as excellent a mother, and an exemplary woman in the majority of respects; but her failing—and to all of us some human errors fall—was the especial relish that she always derived from giving Job a touch of the quality of her tongue. At all times, and at all seasons, when the opportunity was at hand, Mrs. Sykes was ready to “go off” with a lecture concerning those things which her spouse *ought* to do, and those things more

particularly which he ought *not* to do; and smoking his pipe, unhappily for Job, came under one of his active and offending commissions. For years—for many long, long years—Mrs. Sykes had forcibly dwelt upon the evils attending this sottish habit; and it would appear, from Job's never abstaining from the indulgence at the conclusion of his duties of the day, that Mrs. Sykes's eloquence had been entirely lost and thrown away upon him. Nevertheless, "Repulsed, but not beaten," was her motto, and she continued to repeat the attacks with all the freshness and vigour of early struggles.

With the stoical patience of that patient being of yore, from whom Job derived the name given to him by his godfathers and godmothers, he for the most part, and, indeed, always, received these expostulations with his sins and evil doings without a murmur. By means only of a secret telegraph—its mysterious working known but to his inward man—Job

returned rejoinders and replies to Mrs. Sykes' homilies. To a reproof, gentle in its bearings, he would smile, and wink his left eye at the ceiling, as much as to say, "The old un's at it again." To an accusation, clear and defined, Job's eyebrows gradually mounted above his eyes, many inches from the position designed for them by nature; and his lips, by an adverse action, drew themselves into an elongated focus, in close proximity to the base of his double chin. To a positive upbraiding (but this was very rare), Job, if he had a pipe lighted between his lips, opened his mouth to its utmost width, and, permitting the cloud to expend itself by degrees, suddenly blew the thick mass forwards; and behind the screen of ashy vapour burst into an eruption of internal laughter, diffusing a deep mulberry hue over the entire surface of his features, and charging his eyeballs with blood, even to the danger of bursting their veins. But, by the time the smoke had so mingled with the thinner air, that his

countenance became again clear and distinctly visible, Job was as calm, and his features as unruffled, as the surface of a mirror, or a lake untouched even by a dying waft of the summer's wind at sunset. Mrs. Sykes was occasionally quite astonished at this phenomenon ; but being, as it were, in the dark and fog as to the mysterious issue, she turned up her eyes, pursed her mouth, and shook her head with melodramatic despondency, which seemed to convey the resignation of a Christian's failure at the attempted conversion of a heathen.

If Job was an exclusive in the habit that adorned his person and general demeanour, that which rendered Mrs. Sykes a distinction from her neighbours and fellow-creatures was equally deserving to be classed under the title of singular and original. Bleached as a snow-drift was the close cap that fitted her head, smoothed on the brow in two equal divisions of air, whitening with age, and which set off the intricately-worked and deep border of lace

with which it was fringed. Plump, rubicund, and smooth were her cheeks; and the clear blue eye which glistened with a good and a kindly expression, still unmarked by the crow's-foot of care, formed the copious index to her heart and to her thoughts; and that they were generous, anybody might become surety for, although a stranger to a practical illustration of them. Short, stout—perhaps *fat* would be more honest in the description of Mrs. Sykes's figure—and round as a pippin she certainly was; but a more wholesome, healthy, laughing (except when Job was concerned,) light-hearted, light-heeled soul never shook sides at a joke, nor revelled in detailing one. Still Mrs. Sykes was not the *identical* Mrs. Sykes upon all occasions. Oh dear no! a greater and more perfect actress never fretted an hour upon the stage. Just to see her counting the shillings, half-crowns, and crowns which Job shelled out from his pocket after a successful capping, mingled with exclamations of “deary me’s,

lawksadaisies, and who'd-have-thought-it;" and to behold her on a washing-day with an abundance of rain, and no prospects of drying the family linen for a week or ten days, she was quite a different being in her affections. Then to witness her listening with pricked ears to some fun, frolic, and accident which might have befallen an acquaintance on return from market or fair or trysting spot, and seeing her wend her way to the gray, ivy-clung, moss-grown church on the seventh and hallowed day—on which even the debtor is at rest—with her Bible, securely clasped in massive fastenings, in her hand, and dressed, from toe to the topmost piece of riband in her bonnet, in Sunday bib and tucker; she was a totally different specimen of the female form divine. To behold the black silk drawn bonnet, having a strong resemblance to an inverted coal-scuttle, placed jauntily upon her head; for Mrs. Sykes had a strong spice of the common vanity of her sex blended with her composition; and the

solemn countenance that it so amply shaded as she paced, robed in all her dignity, up the gravel path, flanked by tall, stately, and grave-looking fir trees, in the churchyard; a stranger might have naturally imagined that a hearty laugh had never broken that ascetic expression. And then to see her acknowledging the bows and curtseys of respect (for Mrs. Sykes was extensively respected by the juvenile branches of her neighbours) shown to her by the groups of little children on her way thither, it was quite charming—quite. The grandeur of the family of the Sykeses was well maintained in the nobility of her bows. Not the breadth of a barley-corn was conceded by look or gesture; and the most chary of keeping up appearances was never more so than Mrs. Sykes, particularly on a Sunday. The farthingale, too, which stuck out the black ribbed silk dress, as thick and substantial as a good stout board, giving to view her high-heeled and buckled shoes, added, in no small measure, to the effect;

while the kerchief, pinned, without crease or wrinkle, tightly across her bosom, completed the choicest costume in Mrs. Sykes's wardrobe, and concerning which she was not a little proud and dainty of her care.

It has been before stated, that one of the most conspicuous failings of Mrs. Sykes was the practice she observed in talking *at* and *to* her husband in terms of reproach; and this was a system that she had adopted for so long a period, that it really had become one of the common necessities of her existence. But, as it may be supposed that she enjoyed this pabulum, and indeed luxury, without interruption to its enjoyment, from the patience and resignation of Job; it should be observed here, that, like all sweets, there was a positive acid in the component parts; and Mrs. Sykes found the analysis in the form of two monosyllables frequently delivered by her son and only child, James, the whipper-in.

“Now, mother”—James, who was as much

like his father in figure and general bearing, as a young man six-and-twenty could be to one approaching three-score—"Now, mother," he would say, "shut up."

These were the magical words that at once operated as a floodgate to the flow of Mrs. Sykes's oratory. "Shut up," and she was at fault, let the previous syllables have dropped as smoothly as oil, and with the speed of electricity, from her lips. "Shut up," and Mrs. Sykes, in the graphic language of a departed philosopher, was a "cooked goose." It is impossible to say how this influence was gained by James over his maternal parent; but so it was, and she yielded to his sway with no more rebellious inclination than a slender reed to the force of the blasting gale. The anticipation even of these instructions, so briefly couched, was often quite enough for Mrs. Sykes; and she frequently, when the latch was lifted at the outer door of the cottage, and Jem's well-known heel was heard, broke off short in an incompleting sen-

tence relating to Job's corruptions, much to the huntsman's satisfaction.

If, by any accident, Mrs. Sykes did not hear the approaching footfall of her son, Job sometimes gave her timely intimation by pointing with a straightened thumb to the quarter from whence he might shortly be expected to appear ; and this was sufficient to put an estoppel to a farther continuance of the good woman's powers of elocution.

Both long and loudly Mrs. Sykes coughed, from the irruption of the smoke into the intricate cavities of her bronchial tubes ; and Job, stretched in his chair of ease, slippered, and with the knees of his breeches unbuttoned, as increased facilities for relaxation, regarded the irritation of his better half's conductors to her lungs with indescribable satisfaction. He smiled blandly, as, from time to time, he took a glance, and perceived the flattering appearance of no immediate cessation to the temporary malady. Mrs. Sykes had just been, in the ab-

sence of James, who was at the kennel, treating herself by delivering, for the tenth thousand time, a lecture of unusual force upon the dire evils connected with smoking. And it forms a circumstance worthy of peculiar remark, that the very subject of her discussion caused an unexpected mischief little reckoned on by the fluent lecturer.

"I really—think," gasped Mrs. Sykes, "that—I—never—shall"—and then the violence of the irruption completely denied the further utterance of a syllable.

Job was in ecstasies. He winked at the ceiling, rubbed his hands and knees, threw out a monster volume of smoke, so as to obscure his visage, and laughed inwardly, accompanied by sundry nods and winks at a portrait of one of his ancestors, suspended immediately above his head, as if there was a secret understanding between them.

At this moment the clink of a latch was heard, and quickly afterwards the young whip-

per-in entered the room, with a horn lantern in his hand. As he placed it upon the table he blew his fingers, and breathed upon them as if they were benumbed by the cold, and he stamped his feet heavily upon the floor.

"What, is't a sharp un, again lad?" inquired Job.

"Ay, father, it is," replied his son. "The wind's a regular noser from the north-east, and I'll be figged if the frost's going to break."

"Then we're not to have any hunting yet?" rejoined Job dolefully.

"No," added James, drawing a chair by the side of the elder Sykes, and taking a seat, "there isn't a chance of it."

"Well then," returned the huntsman, "we must make the best of it. But what frosts were ever sent for, I can't discover.

"Smoking," began Mrs. Sykes, who had not, as yet, been able to utter a word since the arrival of her son, and even now, this was the only one she was capable of uttering. "Smok-

ing," repeated she, and then she made violent signals with her hands, expressive of her inability to proceed.

"Come, come, mother," said James, mistaking the intentions of the worthy dame, and believing that she was about to commence a sermon upon the noxious habit indulged in by his father—a proceeding he never would allow in his presence. "Come, come, mother, shut up."

Mrs. Sykes became all but violent in the struggle to comply with the directions, and at length, after swallowing a tankard of water, brought fresh from "the moss-green bucket that hung by the well," by the attentive James, she had so far obtained the mastership over the attack as to be able to explain, in a husky voice, that she was not going to enlarge upon the subject anticipated by her son. Her say, upon that head, she had said previous to his coming, and as 'waste not, want not,' applied equally to words as it did to flour, bread, cheese, coals, candles, and parsnips, and every other kind of

domestic cookery, she would not for a moment entertain the idea of throwing away useful language on one who had ever since her acquaintanceship with him, and that was rather better than thirty-five years, nine months, and a fortnight, appeared to be not a jot the better, or in the remotest degree improved. It was a matter of regret, great regret, on her part, to perceive the stagnated state of her husband's morals; but since she could not be accused of being a lukewarm looker-on, or a silent party to their want of motion, of course this in some measure offered a consolation that warmed her bosom, and prevented the cramp and rheumatism in her heart."

"That'll do, mother," returned James, extending a more than usually liberal permission to the uninterrupted enjoyment of the dame's elocutionary capacities; "that'll do: shut up."

Mrs. Sykes resumed her knitting in silence.

Job, who had been puffing a perfectly impenetrable fog around him, was laughing so violently during the delivery of the old lady's homily, and, at the same time, using such desperate efforts to conceal his mirth, that it appeared extremely probable he would either burst, or that the safety-valve (to use a metaphor of the age), would blow itself off, from the immense pressure and stress upon the boiler.

"I think," observed James, the mediator and pacificator in these one-sided differences in the heads of the family of the Sykes, "I think," replied he, "that a flagon of nice warm spiced ale, with a toast in it, wouldn't harm us, father, to-night."

"In good truth, no, Jem," replied the huntsman, taking the pipe from his lips, and slightly raising himself in his chair; "particularly," continued he, emphatically, "if you'll mix it in your tip-top style."

"That I'll engage to do," rejoined his son.

“ Will you draw a couple of quarts of the best October, mother, or shall I ?” inquired he.

Mrs. Sykes bowed slowly, even majestically, and intimated by the movement that she would take upon herself the duty of obtaining the required beverage from the cellar ; and, disposing of her work, left the room for this purpose.

“ I’ll make her smile again presently,” remarked James, laughing ; for a kinder-hearted better-humoured, more jovial fellow, never lived ; and, if he appeared to tyrannize over his mother’s weakness, never did a despot exercise a power with a more praiseworthy purpose ; for it was always to establish peace and good-will.

Job gave a sage nod with his head, refilled the bowl of his pipe, applied a light, settled himself more comfortably than ever in his chair, and winked at the ceiling.

“ Only let her taste,” resumed James, going

to a cupboard in one corner of the room, in which there were rows of glasses, black bottles, lemons, pots of currant jelly, and jams of many kinds and descriptions, pickles of all sorts, and odds and ends of every sort and nature connected with, and relating to, the creature comforts of life; all blazoned and open to the eye of every curious observer, through the medium of a glass door of fantastic shape; "only let her," repeated he, diving among the heterogeneous materials, and bringing forth some sugar, nutmeg, ginger, a grater, three glasses, a small silver ladle, with a fawn's foot for a handle, and a tin pot, quite as bright as the silver, "taste half a pint of my oil of comfort," continued James, placing the materials upon the polished oak table, "and I'll be bound that she'll be as full of smiles as——"

"Nancy Dixon, when you're whispering close to her ear," interrupted his father, making the rafters of the dwelling ring and vibrate with the hearty roar that followed.

"Now, that's too bad, father," expostulated James Sykes; and, while he spoke, the blood mantled upon his brow and in his cheeks, and he used unnecessary violence in rasping the nutmeg.

"Too bad!" returned Job, swaying his head a little from one side to the other. "If I was young Jem, instead of mouldy-headed Job, singe my hackles but I should think it precious good. She's," continued Job, drawing the air through his teeth, "what I call a clipper at all points. In the first place, there's a pretty, little, thorough-bred head, put on as nice a neck and shoulders as ever a man's eyes would like to rest on. Then there's those curls, as brown as a chesnut, always flicking and dancing about her pink cheeks, and the damp atmosphere never straightens 'em by any chance."

Job paused to take a whiff or two from his pipe, and his son seemed to be inclined for his continuing the discourse, for he rubbed the

nutmeg more gently, and offered no syllable of interruption.

“As to eyes,” resumed the huntsman, “I must say that they are out-an’-outers. They’re as soft as a pigeon’s, and yet they gimble themselves into one’s in’ards, like the sunshine through a chink in the shutters. And then,” continued Job, warming upon his subject, “as to form, in a little compass, I think she’s the best mould that ever came across my path; although,” said he, dropping his voice to a whisper, for Mrs. Sykes’s bundle of keys, which always clanked at her girdle, now gave notice of her return, “your mother, Jem, was an uncommon nice un in her points of make and shape.”

It was quite clear, upon Mrs. Sykes entering with the flagon of foaming ale in her hand, that she had regained her wonted good and cheerful temper; for, as she placed it before her son, she put one arm round his waist at the same time, and gave him a hug of endear-

ment, while there was not a vestige left of that rigidity of countenance which formed the striking characteristic upon departure.

This was not lost upon James, who always proved himself a truly affectionate son, and he gave a response which, although lost to mortal gaze and hearing, caused the old lady to give a nimble step, and to ejaculate, "Oh!" as a preliminary to laughing, to the dangerous extent of producing a second edition to her cough.

Job regarded these fresh aspects of family matters with great satisfaction, and he winked at the ceiling in the most decided manner of conveying a lively gratitude.

"I shall sleep to-night," muttered he to himself, "thank——" perhaps Job was about to thank God; but he stopped short, and added, "thank Jem!"

And now James, with all the rapidity in his power, mingled the ingredients into the tin pot, and placed it on the bright, crackling embers to

quickly send forth a truly fragrant incense to gratify the least susceptible of olfactory nerves.

Even the blackbird, inspected in his wicker-cage over the hearth, and a bald-pated, old, tailless fellow he was, who, for years since, had ceased to welcome the approach of spring with a single note, and he recked nothing of winter, for he was always warm, well-fed, and comfortable; now roused himself on his perch, and, shaking his feathers, seemed to understand the matters in progress exceedingly well. He even danced a feeble hop—for he was the very patriarch of his race, up and down the perch; and, like one down in the vale of honourable years attempting the agility of youth's well-strung thews and sinews, thus conveyed the gaiety in his breast.

A kitten, the rescued one from the litter, saved from the last periodical confinement of the staid old tabby, now purring with up-reared tail about the feet of her mistress, chased its tail in the bright piercing light of the moon,

streaming on the carpet behind the closely-drawn and chequered curtains, and was enjoying the fun to a remarkable extent.

In short, everything bore a happy, cheerful appearance in the apartment, except, perhaps, the mask of the fox, with his fore pad underneath, and his brush curled round them, which were nailed over the door; and this bore the same sneer and vindictive intent as it had in the fangs of death. The bits, spurs, and whips with which the walls of the room were adorned, reflected the flickering blaze on their polished surfaces; and even a couple of horse-shoes, concerning which Job could tell, and had often told, a strange tradition connected with the family of the Sykeses, hung on a hook in a conspicuous position, and rivalled their neighbours in their qualities of shining; for not even a brass-headed nail within the domain escaped the friction continually bestowed upon the goods and chattels of which Mrs. Sykes was the mistress and controller.

"There," said James, lifting the prepared beverage from the fire, and pouring it steaming into the glasses, "I'll bet a broomstick to a shaving that you'll find this moisture act as oil to the rust."

Mrs. Sykes, with well-becoming gravity, and Job, smiling as if his heart shone, received the generously filled tumblers from the hand of their attentive son, and after draining their contents—the former by a succession of rapid sips, and the latter by one deep, honest draught—certainly evinced decided symptoms of being refreshed by the potation. Mrs. Sykes delicately brushed her lips with the corner of her handkerchief, and sent forth a short hacking cough, as if the strength of the liquor had rather overcome her; but at the same time this slight chip of female affectation did not prevent a sunny smile from playing upon her lip; while Job patted the bottom of his long waistcoat, and at the same time—winked at the ceiling.

"There!" exclaimed James, finishing the re-

mains in his own glass, and drawing his chair nearer to the fire, "that's what I call the high scent to the comforts o' the world."

"We shouldn't," replied his mother, shaking her head, "think too much of the comforts of the world. Remember, my son, this is a vale of tears—a miserable world."

"A *what?*" ejaculated Job, straining his eyebrows to the extreme altitude of their reach. "A miserable world! May I be run to death by snakes if those who call it so don't feel the gall when they deserve it. A miserable world! Hav'n't we the fruits and flowers of the season? Isn't there sunshine for the summer, with birds to sing from its rise to its setting? An't there rambles, too, in nice shady green lanes, for young lasses and their—" Job broke abruptly off, and looked slyly out of the corners of his eyes towards his son.

James pulled his watch with a jerk from his fob, and observed, that "it was not so late as he expected."

"A miserable world!" repeated Job. For young and old there's always some occupation. If those who may be a little too full in the tooth, or who have no teeth at all, can't make love in the shade of the evening, they can sit on the outside of their cottage doors and smoke their pipes, compare notes of early days, and lay the dust of their thirst with stoups of the brown and bright October. And then, in winter, isn't there the brisk, crackling Yule-log, cracking of nuts and jokes round it, goblin stories, songs, plum-pudding, roast beef, hunt-the slipper, snap-dragon, kisses under the mistletoe, reels and jigs, and all that sort of thing? A miserable world! Upon my life—" and then Job dropped his words one by one, as if they were too precious, in his estimation, for measuring them in a heap—"I've very little doubt, in my mind, that those who expect to meet with a better, will be particularly mistaken."

Mrs. Sykes felt that this delivery was a tres-

pass upon her prerogative ; for she considered all matters connected with theology, named in her presence, as peculiarly her own. However, the spiced ale had so far mellowed all atoms of asperity, that she merely expressed her disapprobation at Job's presumption by dancing her crossed dexter foot rapidly.

For some few minutes nothing was said further upon any subject, and all seemed to be occupied in the contemplation of their thoughts.

" Did ye leave 'em all right in the kennel, lad ?" at length asked the huntsman.

" Quite so, father," replied James, starting from a wakeful dream or reverie, which he appeared to have been wrapped in.

" Does Render seem as lame as ever ?" inquired the huntsman.

" No," returned James ; " the old hound is very little foot-sore to-night."

" That's well," added Job ; " for a stancher never opened at a fox."

" No," responded the whipper-in ; " or, if

there was, I should like to know his pedigree."

"Ah!" exclaimed Job, "on the earth, under the earth, and above the earth, there never was his superior; although—and that I don't like to admit—there might possibly be, and have been, his equal."

"I can't believe it," added James; "I really can't believe it."

"Then you couldn't believe, I suppose," replied the huntsman, knocking the ashes from his pipe, which savoured strongly of the beginning of a story, long and marvellous in its details, "a hound or a dog of any kind or nature," continued he, "capable of being more stanch than Render?"

"No," replied the whipper-in, "I could not."

"Then, I'll just tell you a circumstance," rejoined Job, "that will out-do anything you may have seen in that old clipper's manner of running a fox to earth, or pulling him down."

Give me another sip of that ale, Jem, before I begin, for talking's dry work."

James readily acceded to the huntsman's request, and after he had done full justice to the second edition, Job thus commenced :—

"When I was a lad of eighteen, as a matter o' course, and therefore I needn't tell ye, I was whip under that old figure there ;" and as he spoke, he pointed to a professed portrait of his paternal parent hanging on the wall opposite ; and if it was not a decided libel upon that departed individual, he must have been very grim and acid in expression. "It so happened," resumed Job, "that in my first season, and on the 1st of September, the Squire lost his favourite pointer Romp, a large liver and white bitch, handsomer than any picture that ever was seen ; and, although the country round was scoured from end to end, no tidings could be gained of her. Bill Rap, the keeper, said, the last time that he saw her was skirting the top of Arkmoor-hill, and she appeared as if

drawing; but losing sight of her on the brow, and on the edge of Kipsey's-copse, he never again clapped eyes upon her. For some time—it was before you were hatched, Jem—there was nothing talked of but Romp's unaccountable disappearance, and many thought, at last, that she had been spirited away. Bill tramped and plodded from sunrise to sunset, but could not, and never did, gain any information concerning her. As you may think, the Squire was very sorry, and much puzzled, at the unaccountable loss of his favourite; but as all things settle down at last, he at length, and everybody else, appeared to think no more of the loss of Romp. It so chanced, that about the middle of the October following, we drew Kipsey's-copse while cub hunting; and father, that ill-tempered-looking old image there," said Job, again referring, with his indicative finger, to the likeness of his progenitor, "had given me very strict orders to stop every hound that might try to get away with a fox. I'd as soon

think of breaking my neck as breaking his directions, particularly when he looked waxy; and I did my best to keep 'em in the traces and up to the collar, even to the letter. After some touch-an'-goes with two or three couple of puppies, who tried their best to get with a vixen, led by an old hound called Hermitage, and who ought to have known better, for he understood a rate as well as he did a cheer—away he went, with a couple of young uns; and before I could spur to their heads, they settled to a fox, who had made a burst of it, as if the very devil was kicking 'em on end! With spleen and spite, I set to with rowel and flax to stop 'em, and, after speckling my heels with some of the best blood that ever was let from a horse's sides, at last managed to get to their heads. Knowing, although it was no fault of mine, that the old boy would give me a blessing, in his rough manner, for my letting 'em get away, I drove 'em back as hard as I could split, in what may be called a savage humour. Upon getting to

the side of the covert, I thought that there was a favourable chance of giving master Hermitage a taste of the double thong for his disobedience, and I rode at him through a gap into the wood. Just as I did so, however, and the Miller—for that was the name of the horse I was on—had crashed through the boughs for some dozen or two yards, he sunk up to his knees into a rabbit's burrow, and pitched me lightly over his head into a small but deep pit full of tall and thick sedges and high rank grass. As I scrambled to my feet to remount, for I hadn't lost my reins, I was not a little surprised at seeing the skeleton of a dog, in a standing position, among the rushes close to me; and upon taking a step or two nearer, I saw the bones of a bird, bleached as snow, and without a feather or bit of skin upon them, just under the grinning jowl of the dog. Like a flash of lightning, a squib, or a cracker, or any thing else as sharp and smart, I knew what these were without anything like a check in my brain.

There couldn't be a doubt but the anatomy of the dog was the remains of Romp, who had found the bird here, and thus both the pointer and the pointed had died from the very game and stanchness of their natures."

"You don't mean to say that's true, my dear?" remarked Mrs. Sykes, seriously, upon Job's concluding his history.

"I do," replied the huntsman, with respondent gravity; "I do, indeed."

Be it on record, however, that as Job spoke, his son noticed that he gave a slight, a scarcely perceptible, wink at the ceiling, which produced a very equivocal impression as to the seriousness of his meaning in the truth of his assertion.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Sykes, lifting her hands, "what a singular coincidence, to be sure."

CHAPTER VIII.

How far that little candle throws its light!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

ALTHOUGH the room was wide and lofty, and great black beams stretched themselves across the ceiling, and the walls were panelled with oak, here and there enlivened with pictures, fading and faded, of scenes of former times; yet that in which the Squire and John Hardy were ensconced, on the shortest day of the year, did not lack a comfortable influence upon the mercury of the spirits of the two old friends. John's face beamed with its wonted expression of universal kindliness to all animate and inanimate objects of any and every

kind and whatsoever nature, while the Squire, if he wore a shade of comparative seriousness, it proceeded from no deeper cloud of melancholy within. The couple of hearty, green old fellows were sitting opposite to each other, in high-back, deep-bottomed, and capacious chairs, of antique fashion and handicraft, while a horse-shoe table was placed before them, on which stood a brace of rosy bright magnums of port, and one honest bottle of choice madeira, just disinterred from their tomb of sawdust and cobwebs. A screen, composed of intricately wrought tapestry, illustrative of joust and fight, and falconry and love-worn knights in "ladye's bower,"—cased in steel, and yet not proof, withal, against the feathered shaft—embraced their forms, and, in its extensive span, prevented the entry of any chill from without. On the hearth—there was not a grate or a stove in the Range—a pile of logs flared and blazed and licked around, and now and then, through a chink in the screen, rent

in the canvass by the hand that crumbles the stone and mocks the endurance of aught that the hand of man can raise, a stream of light poured upon the grim visage of a plumed knight, and fierce baron, and mailed esquire, suspended in rudely carved oaken frames upon the walls; and although one grasped a mace, and another poised a battle-axe, with deadly vengeance and exterminating purpose fixed upon his bearded lip, and a third wielded a sword with two handles and a double edge, yet time and association had so mellowed down their primary fierceness and dire intent, that now there was no more natural effect of a tendency to let the current of human blood, nor the gratification of any passions, bloody and uncharitable, than in the vizored features of those who clash their blunted blades in melodramatic spectacles. These representatives, the very bones of whom had returned to the dust from whence they had sprung, and whose bucklers, shields, gauntlets, bows,

and shafts now hung around, rusting in the idleness of centuries, might point a moral to many who seek for glory in savage deeds; but then in the Range there were none who stood in need of such a lesson, and therefore it shall be skipped like a thing worthless of note.

"It's a long time since we were parted, John," observed the Squire, filling his glass to the brim.

"Ay, that it is, Harry," replied John Hardy, imitating the example. "Let me see," he continued, peeping at the bee's-wing floating in the bumper; "it's between thirty and forty——"

"Never keep a tally of time," rejoined the Squire; "adzooks, but you'll persuade me that I am getting old!"

"Old?" repeated John Hardy, interrogatively. "Humph! in the nature of things I suppose that we are getting old; but upon my life, Harry, I can't *see* that you are doing

so, neither can I *feel* that I am. We're old boys," continued John, "that's what we are, you may depend upon it;" and then he drained his glass, which seemed, as he raised it to his lips, to wink an affirmative response.

"Three days!" remarked the Squire, looking into the middle of the polished slab of mahogany before him, on the surface of which the cheerful flames of the Yule-log were reflected like the rays of the sun upon a clear, unruffled lake. "Three whole days you're to be away from me, John."

"Well," returned his companion, "it does appear long, certainly. But then, what *are* three days, Harry? They'll pass away like ——" John deliberately filled his glass again, and drained it to the last drop—"that," concluded he, placing his hand upon the middle of his waistcoat, to indicate the precise locality of the transition of his metaphor. "Here, I may say," continued John, "at one moment, and gone the next."

"I drink to your safe and speedy return, John," rejoined his friend, "and may your journey be a fruitful one!"

"I thank you for the former," added John Hardy, "and hope with you for the latter; but that, of course, must depend upon circumstances. If I should learn any clue to the object of our united wishes it will be, at least, trouble and time well spent."

"I'm not so certain of that," rejoined the Squire thoughtfully. "If the discovery lead to the certainty of Tom being the offspring of some outcast, or disgraced and branded wretch, it will be far from conducive to his happiness to mine, or to yours. His birth, now, is in a state of uncertainty; and whatever reasonable probability there may be in supposing that his eyry was not in the cedar top, yet there is no ground for thinking that he may not be respectably, if lowly, born. If he should prove to be the child of the humblest on earth, as I have before said, so long as he can claim

from an honest stock, he shall inherit all my earthly possessions. There is not a creature living, that I can trace, who has the slightest claim of consanguinity upon me. I am the last, John," and the Squire's voice shook as he spoke, "I am quite the last of a very old race; and if I could see, before the curtain of my life be dropped to the close, the sprout and springing of a new line in our adopted boy——"

"That's it," interrupted John Hardy; "that's it. *Our* adopted boy: not *mine*, remember."

"We have called him so of late years," continued the Squire, smiling, "although I recollect the time when I insisted upon your having the honour exclusively to yourself. However, as I was about to remark," resumed he, "if I can consistently make him inheritor of the Range, I will; but his provision, although it shall be ample, must be in a very different form, if he turns out to be proven

the son of crime or of vice. The finger of scorn would be pointed not only at him, but at his children; for the wealthy are naturally envied by the many; and, if there be a blot upon their escutcheon, time is not permitted to efface it. Conspicuous positions in life to such are painful, and it is far better that they should occupy the rear ranks than the first and front."

"I quite agree with you, Harry," (when did John disagree with anybody?) "but it seems to me very hard that the world should be so unjust as to visit the sins of the father upon the child."

"If the world be unjust in this, and I will not gainsay that it is so," returned his friend, "it is, at any rate, generous enough to regard the reflected honours and virtues of the parent upon his offspring."

"Exactly so," coincided John, "to be sure it does; and so the world, after all, isn't such a scamp as one at a glance might suppose."

"I would not have Tom aware of my resolve upon any account," resumed the Squire; "but I am quite decided, in the event of what I fear being realized, he must not become that which, in secret, we have planned."

"It will be no disappointment to him," said John Hardy; "for he hasn't an idea of it; but it would be much better, I think, not to sift the matter any further, and to let it all sink, as it had until we stirred it up again, into forgetfulness."

"In that case I should be content," replied the Squire; "but the truth and honesty, and, I think, pride of his excellent nature have determined otherwise. He is now of an age to judge for himself; and, as you know, the absorbing thought of his existence is his origin; and, until learned, come evil come good, he will never be satisfied."

"It may be a very natural impulse to wish to know who your own father was," rejoined John Hardy. "I might, if I was not confi-

dent in his departed identity.—*Requiescat in pace!*”

“It’s about time for him to return from the vicarage,” observed the Squire, glancing at the dial of his watch.

“In that case,” replied John, “it’s time for me to start; for Blossom isn’t an active colt, as Mike says, and we have to travel not a mile less than fifteen before sundown.”

“You’ll scarcely manage it,” rejoined his friend, “and therefore delay not a moment longer; for, if you get benighted, some accident may occur.”

“I shall carry loaded pistols in my holster,” returned John, valiantly; at the same time producing from the hidden mysteries of his shirt collar the flabby and crumpled end of a false one.

A bell clanged loudly; it was the knell, and it rung hoarsely and spitefully long, for worthy, honest, jovial, simple-hearted, and well-beloved John Hardy’s departure from the Range.

Many long, long years—long enough, indeed, to turn lisping infancy to mellow life—revolved upon the axle of eternity since his becoming an inmate under its hospitable roof; and although he had, more than a thousand times, during this interval spoken of visiting “his place in town,” no such resolution had ever been put in practice as to quit, for one entire day, the house that had sheltered him so long and so happily.

Well might the excitement that pervaded the establishment, from the cellar to the roof, seeming to vibrate through every brick, stone, and beam, increase upon its becoming generally known that Blossom, the squabby cob, stood at the entry of the stone porch, bridled, and saddled, and cruppered, and girthed, ready to bear his master from the Range! Well might doors be slammed and banged, and noises of hurried feet be heard running, shuffling, limping, and halting, at every kind of pace and speed, towards the hall where

John stood passively submitting to be incased in a succession of great-coats, dragged, drawn, squeezed, pressed, and tugged upon his round little body, until he possessed no more control or power over his four limbs than if he had been a bale of cotton or a bag of wool!

"I really," gasped John, struggling to raise his chin above an ambitious collar of a coat trying to rear itself above the head of its wearer, "I really feel quite sufficiently clad, thank you," continued he, conquering the collar, and his ruddy face emerging from the conglomerated mass of accumulated cloth, not unlike the moon looming through the vapour of a misty morn.

"No, no, no," hurriedly responded a chorus of voices; and then a cape, its folds reaching below his knees, was buckled round his neck; and the Squire, the busiest of the throng, rolled a large scarlet comforter about John's throat, ears, and eyes, until every sense was rendered nugatory and void.

"Upon my life," gurgled John, after an effectual struggle to make his voice audible from behind the huge mountain of material, and finding himself quite powerless and incapable of performing the slightest office, even to the putting on of his hat; "upon my life," repeated he, in the accents that a wrapped mummy might be supposed to speak, "I can't sufficiently thank you for your care of me; but really, I think that I'm a little overdone."

"No, no, no," again followed the chorus of tongues; and then double pairs of thick woollen gloves were crammed upon John's chubby fingers, and his low-crowned broad-brimmed beaver hat pulled well down over his eyes.

"There!" exclaimed the Squire, triumphantly, "I don't think that you can catch cold, John."

After undergoing a general inspection by everybody present—and every domestic of both sexes, from the oldest to the youngest,

was there—it was unanimously declared that John was in a state of perfect and complete defence against any siege of the inclement elements to which he might be exposed.

Well might the innate vanity of Blossom—for Blossom was a conceited cob—be gratified as he appropriated the greatest share of the attention shown to his master as a compliment paid to himself, when, surrounded by the crowd, showers of blessings were poured upon the head of John Hardy, as he effected, after innumerable futile attempts, a seat upon his saddle. Blossom, indeed, on the spur of the moment, determined to try a little matter of “show off,” and commenced a short series of capers upon the occasion.

“Gently, Blossom, gently, my pretty fellow,” said John, through his comforter. It is needless to say, however, that this order was unheeded, as it was a standing rule with the squabby cob to conform to no mandate whatever, except it came in the shape of Mike’s

cudgel, and that he never opposed. In the scarcely describable fashion of a half kick, one-third rear, a slight mingling of plunge, with a tendency to stumble, and the remainder of the ingredients to his playfulness made up of jibbing and shying, Blossom rendered John Hardy's taking leave of his friends a matter of some difficulty. Waving his whip hand, however, to one and all, the last "God bless ye!" was uttered, and John, at length, found himself fairly on the road.

Mystery is not the object, in relation of the simple adventures befalling John Hardy; and therefore, it shall be here stated, while leaving him jogging along to the fulfilment of his purpose, the cause of his journeying forth into the high-ways and by-ways of the world, although the reader may have partly guessed it, from the brief conference held between him and the Squire, previous to his departure.

Now that Master Tom had mounted the fifteenth year of his unaccountable consignment

to the protection of John Hardy—from the gifts bestowed upon him by bountiful Nature, as he grew towards man's estate, and those that he acquired from the able tutorage of the vicar, his amiable and estimable tutor, aided by Mike, Bill Rap the game-keeper, and Job Sykes the huntsman—he might now be said to be a handsome youth, bold and capable, possessing the accomplishments of a refined gentleman, and the information and experience of an expert sportsman. With his excellent patron, John Hardy, he was regarded as a perfect prodigy, to whom he yielded the overflowing kindness, virtues, and excellence of his own heart; and in the inmost recesses of Tom's grateful affections they were there conferred and dammed up like holy things that they were.

Gradually, very gradually, and yet imperceptibly, slow as it was, Master Tom crept into the good favours of the Squire so securely, that, at length, he was the very focus of their

widely-diffused rays. In him the Squire saw all that he most admired, and nothing that needed a reproof; and from the day of his leaving Dame Woodley's cottage to live under the roof of the Range, it became the cherished hope with the Squire that Tom Hope might demean himself so that he could henceforth look upon him as his heir, and, eventually, the bearer of his old and honourable name. This desire had been shaken in no way whatever by any accident or design, until the determined resolve, plainly declared, and unintermittingly referred to, manifested itself in Master Tom's anxiety for discovering the germ and origin of his existence. From the moment of being made acquainted with his unclaimed, foundling condition, it became an all-engrossing subject of his thoughts—a passion nothing could quell.

In the hours of relaxation from his studies, instead of imitating Job in cheering on the pack, or hearing him send forth a merry song or ringing whistle, he might be seen strolling

listlessly about, brooding on speculations no sooner formed than discarded, and, in short, becoming the very and direct opposite to what he had been—a spiritless, thinking, and miserable Master Tom.

Arguments were useless. All that the kindness of his best friends could invent to wean him from the wretchedness that beset him, was tried, but in vain; and then it was determined that efforts should be renewed in the endeavour to trace the “why” and the “wherefore” of Tom Hope’s pedigree.

Dame Woodley, be it understood, was no party to the attempt. That sagacious old woman shook her head when she learned that it was to be repeated, and expressed a belief that “some people were heathens enough for any thing; but, for her part, she, thank Heaven! was a Christian; and as there could be no doubt of the hamper coming direct from the regions of the blessed, she could only wonder at the doubt of the genuineness of the delivery.”

Some time after the intelligence becoming widely spread, of the offer of reward for any information that might be rendered touching Tom Hope's "come-by-chance," John Hardy received a letter, and not an ill-written scroll, nor ignorantly couched either, informing him "that if he would meet the writer at a certain spot, on the twenty-second of the month, all should be satisfactorily explained concerning the child to whom the advertisements alluded." The place named was within a few hours' reach of the ancient city of Exeter; and we are now speaking of times (the precise date whereof is immaterial) wherein railroads were unheard of, and fast coaches unknown, and the roads so completely deficient of every thing, save mire and deep ruts, that, to complete a journey of five-and-twenty or thirty miles, it was necessary to divide it into a couple of days' labour. This—as it was rather more than the last-named distance to the place of appointment mentioned in the letter—was the

occasion of John Hardy's starting on the afternoon preceding the day named for the meeting with the mysterious stranger; for mysterious he was, as he briefly alleged his inability of meeting John an inch upon the road, without assigning any reason, and stated, that unless John came alone, he might as well save himself the trouble and inconvenience of the journey, as he would see no one and learn nothing.

After many conferences and cogitations with the Squire, in secret conclave—for neither Tom Hope, nor a creature—not even a sharp-eared mouse in the wainscot could catch a murmured syllable—was allowed to know the object of John's departure—it was decided that he should, mounted on Blossom, like a knight-errant of old, start, without giving any account of himself; and confide in chance or destiny for any adventure, good, bad, or indifferent, that might befall him.

CHAPTER IX.

Now all around the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow.

It was very cold; every puddle was glazed with ice; and the road, as hard as adamant, caused Blossom's hoofs to clank loudly, as he trotted briskly—that is to say, briskly for one so sluggish of action—down a long narrow lane leading into the highway. Every now and then, a blackbird, a mavis, or a robin fluttered from the leafless hedge, scared from their retreat by his approach; but no other sounds were to be heard, and nothing else was to be seen, as John bumped alone and disconsolately on his journey. John Hardy felt sad

at heart, for he entertained misgivings, distrust, and evil forebodings of the result of his mission: and he, as the daylight drew in, wished that he had started earlier; and all kinds of unpleasant ideas took possession of his reflective faculties. Like the schoolboy, with slate and satchel, going home through the lone churchyard, and whistling on his way to drive the fear of ghost and goblin from his thoughts, John began to devise plans of ejecting the blue-devils; and, as a preface to his work, he commenced chanting—as well as the smothering scarlet comforter would permit—the hundredth psalm. But a few bars of that cheerful composition had been accomplished, when he was interrupted from proceeding with it by the sudden crash of brambles, twigs, and boughs; and the figure of Mike Crouch standing abruptly before him in the road, not a couple of yards from Blossom's Roman proboscis.

"Your servant, Sir," said Mike, doffing the battered, bruised, and flattened rim of a hat.

"Upon my life!" exclaimed John, managing by a great effort to regain liberty of speech. "Upon my life!" repeated he, shaking his head, "you run a great risk, Mike, in coming upon me so unawares. Don't you see that I carry loaded pistols?" and as John extracted one from the holster—a great yawning brass barrel weapon, looking like a first cousin to a blunderbuss, and held it perpendicularly above his head, so that it might do no mischief by any accident whatever, he looked like a man very much to be dreaded—very much, indeed; at least so John Hardy thought.

"An' it may please your honour!" replied Mike, respectfully, "I'm not frightened at a ——" it is believed, but there are no solid proofs in support of the creed, that Mike was about to complete the sentence by "scarecrow." In fine, however, he avoided so obnoxious a conclusion, and added, after a pause, "gentleman."

"But, don't you see," rejoined John, re-

placing the pistol in the holster, "I might have taken ye for a footpad, highway robber, or something of that sort? and then, if I had made a snap shot at the impulse of the moment, perhaps, Mike," and John Hardy spoke slowly and impressively, "you would have been sent to your last account, without much time for reckoning the audit."

"I might, certainly, Sir, by accident," returned Mike, jerking his hat on the tip of his nose, and placing much emphasis on the completion of the sentence.

"You doubt the correctness of my aim," added John; "but I'd have you remember that you were a sitting—no, a standing shot. And when do I miss a hare in her form, a rabbit rubbing his nose, or cropping clover in the evening on the verge of the coverts, or, indeed, any such, what *I* call *fair* marks?"

"Very seldom, Sir," responded Mike, in that doubtful accent which left the qualified negative in a very equivocal condition.

"Very seldom!" repeated John Hardy, as if much dissatisfied with the answer. "Can you name an instance that occurred lately?" continued he.

"There was that Sarah I found on her seat yesterday morning, you know, Sir," replied Mike, in a tone of justification.

"I tell you now, Mike," rejoined John, shaking his head, "as I told you yesterday, that the hare moved at the very moment I obtained a cool and decided aim at her. Of course this fully accounts for her escape."

Hastily, and perhaps irritably, John spoke upon the subject; and therefore Mike, with the policy of a courtier, essayed to change it quickly.

"Not being in time to see you off with the rest of the servants (Mike was especially fond of classing himself as one of the Squire's retainers), I made up my mind to cut across and overtake you, Sir," said he.

"How did you learn the way I had taken?" inquired John, with unusual sharpness.

Why did Mike hesitate to return an answer, and wherefore came that flush upon his ill-favoured features?

"I ask your pardon, your honour," stammered he. "What did you say?"

John slowly repeated his question.

"Oh Sir!" returned Mike, delving his hands and arms into the pockets of his breeches, "I heard the cob clattering along, and I judged by the sound the road that you had taken."

"Yes, yes," added John—confiding, to-be-led-by-a-cobweb, easily-gulled John Hardy—"Yes, yes," repeated he, "true enough."

"It's a lonesome part, for a mile or so farther," observed Mike, "and so I thought I'd keep you company, with your honour's leave, till you got clear on the right road."

"That was very considerate of ye, Mike," replied his patron, pleased with the attention; "but as, for reasons of my own, I would

rather proceed unattended, return, my good lad; and there are five shillings for your trouble."

Mike accepted the money, and then stated that it was far from his wish to take it, as it was not from any mercenary motive that he came.

John believed him from the bottom of his heart, and said so; but if that worthy man had chanced to have turned his face, and beheld Mike, when he had taken a deferential leave, standing with folded arms in the middle of the road, laughing, grinning, and screwing his countenance into all the ugly forms and comical grimaces within his comprehensive powers, there might have been some misgiving as to the cause being a correct one for his confidence.

Whether it was that Blossom anticipated a certain distance must be performed as a preliminary to tasting the joys of the stable, and that the quicker he moved his reluctant limbs, the sooner these pleasures would be embraced, is a

matter known only to that sagacious animal ; but it is an undeniable fact, that he evinced a decided disposition not only to increase his speed, but to *mend* his pace. For, instead of jolting his master after the fashion of using a pepper-box, as was his wont, he literally adopted an easy canter, and sped away over the frosty ground upon the very best of terms with himself, his rider, and the world.

If John was surprised at this natural phenomenon, he was no less pleased with it ; and as he was borne through the bracing air, lightly and cheerfully, his spirits mounted, and he soon lost every trace of gloom and shadows of fancied evils.

Deep and deeper still the shades of night gathered around, and one by one the stars peeped out glistening from their azure canopy ; an endless succession of lights tipping the tree-top, and flashing in the hoar frost, now crisping every blade of grass that grew. The moon, too, sailed above the horizon, and with the ex-

ception of a few fleecy clouds, that skimmed across her disk, veiling but not concealing the pale rays, offered a broad and steady beacon to guide our traveller on his way.

And now miles were gained; and now another, and now another, was added to the score. And did Blossom—the stalwart, squabby cob, begin to slacken in his speed and ardour? Not he. His will, for once, was good, and of his powers a question was never raised.

Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, on, Blossom, on!

Yes, past lowly thatched cottages, through the lattices of which streams of warm light poured from the blazing fagot and log; and up the hill, where the old windmill—a dilapidated, rickety, creaking, squeaking old thing that self-same windmill is at the best of times—stands ready to grind all the grist that is brought; and past the direction-post at the four cross-ways—tall and seared weeds nearly choke it from observation; and as to the pompous profession of being a direction-post now, there

never was anything so idle, for the storms and showers of the changing seasons have long since expunged all sign and symbol of the whereabouts to which it so pointedly referred in better days ; and past the blacksmith's forge, not a spark now flitting from its belching chimney ; and through the shallow stream crossing the road, and by the hollow tree on the village green — what tales that old tree could tell if it could but repeat a tithe that had been told beneath its shade !—and past the kissing-stile at the end of the village, that very often so opportunely obstructed the way to church across the fields — Blossom bore his master briskly and safely.

Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, on, Blossom, on !

And now past great lumbering wagons, piled to the apex of the span of awning with all kinds of moveables, drawn by teams of great dropsical horses, three abreast, and tinkling bells ringing at their heads, the squabby cob rattled, with pride swelling in his heart at giving them the “ go-by.”

"Yo-ho!" hallooed the wagoner, waking from his dozy winks, and comfortably stretched in a heap of straw in front of the unwieldy vehicle. "Yo-ho!"

"Yo-ho!" returned John heartily; but he tightened no rein, and soon the tinkling bells were heard faintly in the distance.

Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, on, Blossom, on!

Up hill and down, and level, slope, and slant, the squabby cob maintained his even pace; and if he puffed a little from want of use to such exertion, still he was far from being run to a stand-still.

Upon turning a somewhat abrupt corner in the road, John became conscious that he was in the immediate vicinity of a very comfortable-looking inn. A tremendous savage representation of some unnatural monster, painted in yellow, swung upon a rusty hinge above the portal; and the inhabitants of these parts, being gifted with strong imaginative powers, called it the Lion. It is somewhat singular,

that at the moment of John's becoming sensible of the Lion being so near at hand, Blossom became also cognizant of the fact; and that quick-sighted, precocious, squabby cob no sooner caught a glance of the Lion, than he testified his desire of paying the rampant animal a visit by coming to a sudden and dead stop at his door. John Hardy did not roll over his ears; but it may be said that a miracle alone prevented him.

"Who-ho, who-hoo-ooo-oooo, my little feller!" hallooed a voice in an expostulatory tone; and when John had quite recovered his seat, he perceived, by the aid of the strong light of the moon, and a glimmering lamp above his head, that somebody held Blossom by the bridle.

"Young man," said somebody, in a deep-toned, sententious voice, "never be in a hurry. Don't ——" Somebody was evidently at fault; "don't do nothin' in haste what may be repented at leisure!"

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Nothing could be more self-evident than that this sentiment was one of somebody's old musty stock, and was brought in by way of a finish.

"Dear me!" exclaimed John, "I'm very much obliged to ye, my good friend; but I had no intention of tarrying here, nor, indeed, until I arrived at Exeter."

"Ex-e-ter!" repeated somebody, dwelling upon the syllables. "Humph!"

"How far is it?" asked John.

"How far is it?" repeated somebody, halting at each word as he delivered it. "Why, it may be a matter of four miles, a little more or a little less, as the case may be; but—you'll excuse my saying it, young man" (somebody persisted in calling John a young man, and the term was not displeasing to his ears)—"there's accommodation here for man *and* beast. Yes, yes, at the Lion may be found a good, well-aired bed, and a warm stable; clean, wholesome sheets, and capital straw; chops, steaks, sound oats, and sweet hay; wines, spirits, strong beer,

and water that can't be beat, and mayn't be matched."

"You're very obliging, I'm sure," rejoined John. "May I ask whether you are the landlord of this inn?"

"I am that individooal," returned the host.

"Well, then!" added John, as if communing with himself, "I think I'll stop here to-night, and start early in the morning; for I feel rather wearied, and it's getting late."

"Permit me to observe, Sir," said the landlord — "as the vice-chairman of the Rummy Club says every Saturday night, when we meet in the best parlour — 'that such a sentiment does credit to your natur.' Here, Dick, come and take this gentleman's oss."

"Feed him well, if you please," said John, dismounting, and delivering Blossom to the care of a sturdy-framed lad, who made his appearance with alacrity.

"Look after that oss," ordered the landlord, in a tone that conveyed a solemnity with it,

"as you would your mother, Dick. I need say no more, Sir," continued he; "for that boy is remarkably fond of his mother."

Leading the way, the host—a very corpulent being, with the figure and form of a quart pot—conducted John Hardy into the narrow passage of the Lion. Waddling after him, for his wrappers were strange impediments to his gait, John hastened; and as he arrived at a little sort of a projecting window thrown up, called the bar, he was particularly struck with the features of an extremely pretty girl, gracefully bending over a glass of whisky toddy she was engaged in mixing.

"Nancy, my dear," said the host, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder at his customer, with greater significance than politeness, "this young man will stay at the Lion to-night."

Nancy curtsied and smiled, and shook some very long curls that hung bobbing and dancing on each side of her rosy cheeks, and, snatching

a candle from a table at hand, skipped nimbly before the bulky host — her excellent parent — and begged John to step that way.

Preceded by the two, John Hardy was heralded into a small and snug apartment, which, from two folding doors, seemed to lead into a much larger one.

“ I suppose,” remarked the landlord, lifting a round fur cap from a brow quite devoid of hair, not from any feeling of respect to his new comer, but from a sensibility that he invariably entertained upon entering any private room in the Lion, “ that you’re not accustomed to these roads, young man ? ”

“ No,” replied John, tugging at the buckle of the cape, and making many fruitless struggles to uncase, and give himself to view ; “ I can’t say that I am ; nor, indeed, to any other.”

“ Nor, indeed, to any other ! ” slowly repeated the host. “ What ! an’t you a commercial traveller, or cattle-jobber, or something o’ that sort ? ”

"Oh dear no!" rejoined John. "My name's Hardy. I live with my friend Mr. Lawrence, at the Range; perhaps you may have heard of him, although not of me."

"Squire Lawrence — at the Range — Mr. Hardy!" ejaculated the landlord, in unconnected sentences, and looking like a man filled to overflowing with surprise.

Nancy, who had been stirring the fire into a blaze, dropped the poker, and stood regarding John's form, when he made himself known, as if she had completely lost her presence of mind.

"Not heard of you, Sir!" at length exclaimed the host, stripping himself of his abridgment of a coat, for he never wore a skirt to this garment, and rushing to assist John in taking off his layers of clothing. "Not heard of you, Sir! Tell Ned Dixon that he never heard of his respected grandmother! Yes, Mr. Hardy, I'm Edward Dixon of the Lion. I suppose you never heard of me? Ha, ha,

ha, ha," and then Edward Dixon laughed long and loudly at the absurdity of such a supposition.

John, most decidedly, had not heard of such an individual; but as he felt that he should wound the feelings of Edward Dixon by saying so, he gave no reply, but joined in the laugh.

"And that's *Nancy Dixon*," said the landlord, pausing in dragging off the last coat that remained to be stripped from John Hardy's person, when he had got it as far as his elbows, and thus leaving him in about as helpless a condition as a trussed fowl. "That's *Nancy Dixon*, that is," repeated he, chuckling inwardly. "I suppose, Sir, you never heard of her, nor Jem Sykes neither?" and then the host of the Lion made known to everybody in the house, and a great many out of it, that he was enjoying one of his own jokes immensely.

"Nancy Dixon!" exclaimed John Hardy.
"Dear me! Bless my life, to be sure I have.

Why, that's the name of the young damsel James Sykes, the whipper-in, is to be married to."

"The same, Sir," replied the host, releasing John from his helpless state; "and there she is, to answer for herself," continued he, referring to his daughter, by sundry jerks of a straightened thumb.

Nancy, blushing and confused with these personal remarks, resumed the poker, and made a prodigious clattering among the coals and cinders.

"I'm quite delighted with this accidental meeting with you, my dear," said John, advancing towards Nancy, and taking her hand, gently and kindly. "I have frequently heard of you through my friend Harry — Mr. Lawrence, I should say; and he, I believe, through Job the huntsman: and it's a great pleasure to see anybody we have heard much praised, particularly when we're a little surprised at there not being more praise bestowed."

"You're very kind, Sir," replied Nancy, bending a curtsy, and turning her head slightly aside; for she was unused to compliments, and the blood now tingled in her cheeks from the effect of John's gallantry.

"It was quite an accident your comin' here, sir, it would seem," remarked the host; "and all but an accident *comed* of it; for you were precious near smellin' the ground when your nag stopped."

"Very near, indeed," replied John, rubbing his hands, and smiling; "particularly near," continued he, occupying a chair, and settling himself in front of the grate. "And now, Mr. Dixon, what can I have?"

"What can you have?" repeated Edward Dixon, dropping his double chin upon his breast, and closing his projecting light-blue, goggle eyes. "Humph!" and thus deeply meditating for a few seconds, the worthy host seemed to be refreshing himself with a short dose.

"I think, Sir," suggested his daughter, after waiting a very liberal time for the bringing forth of her parent's idea in a procrastinated state of incubation, "I think, Sir, we can let you have a broiled fowl with mushroom sauce, chops, steaks, or some——"

"Stay, stay," interrupted John, "don't proceed another step, my good girl. The broiled fowl, if you please, as soon as you can; for I'm both cold and hungry."

Quickly the brisk, comely, neat, pretty little Nancy Dixon hastened from the apartment to fulfil the order in the most tempting and captivating manner that her culinary knowledge would permit.

"I believe, Sir," observed the landlord, waking from his trance, "that there's no occasion for my putting my finger in the pie, now. The affair's settled."

"Quite so, my friend, thank ye," returned John.

"Very good," added Edward Dixon; and

then, with a slow and deliberate step, he turned upon his heel and quitted the apartment.

It has been before stated, that the room in which John was located was snug and cozy ; and so he thought upon taking a survey of it. For there were bright scarlet curtains drawn across the windows, and little sketches of "contented shepherds," happy gardeners," "merry cow-boys," "jolly sheep-shearers," and many other pictures of such-like blissful mortals, in corresponding states of beatitude, hung around ; and over the mantel-shelf there was the print of a fat man, with a boyish countenance, lifting a tankard of foaming ale to his lips, and very like the figure of Bacchus sometimes seen mounted on a hogshead, half a century older, and more decently attired ; and this old toper appeared to be almost suffocated with mirth. John looked at this figure of fun, until he felt a powerful inclination to laugh too ; and at length, yielding to it, he burst into

a hearty roar, and kept it up until his sides ached again.

"Dear me!" ejaculated John, forcing a check with difficulty upon his mirth, "what a stupid old fellow I am, to be sure; some people would really consider me fit only for a lunatic asylum."

Just as this soliloquy was finished, the door opened with a measured movement, and in stalked Edward Dixon, bearing in his hand a reeking glass of some liquid mixture or other. With a portentous expression upon his heavy countenance, the landlord approached John Hardy, and in silence proffered him the well-filled goblet.

"Oh," exclaimed John, "what's this?"

Edward Dixon made no reply; but gave a sage nod, and forced the glass into John's hand.

There was no mistaking this pantomimic indication; and so John returned an answer by taking a sip of a comprehensive form, and

said, turning his eyes to the ceiling, "that it was truly delicious—immensely so."

"I should say it just was," returned Edward Dixon, "or I must have lost my reputation. A reputation, Sir," continued the landlord, tapping the middle of his waistcoat, reaching nearly to his knees, "that I dearly prize, for mixin' of punch."

"I am certain that you well deserve it," responded John, taking another pull at the punch; "I may say *richly* deserve it," continued he, emptying the glass.

"A cold stomach," remarked Edward Dixon theoretically, "knows the value of hot punch. I thought it better to take yours in what I may call the nick o' time, Sir, to show what *could* be done in the matter of punch; and it does me good to see that merit meets with a just reward. Now, if I had postponed the visit of a glass to your lining, Mr. Hardy, until after the respects paid to it by the broiled fowl, you wouldn't have felt the glow, Sir, that is

now spreading itself all through your wheels and mainsprings. Not that I'm throwing cold water on the broiled fowl and mushroom sauce! No, no, no. Anything my Nancy takes in hand," said the proud father, "must not be spoken of slightly."

"Am I, then, to be indebted to your daughter for my supper?" asked John Hardy.

"You are, Sir," replied the landlord; and if it's a matter that will give you the smallest sort of comfort, ye never need pay her nor me either."

"Tut, tut!" hurriedly rejoined John. "I merely meant, indebted to her kind attention."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hardy," returned the host, "but I'm a plain matter of fact. Yes, Sir, you see in me, Edward Dixon, not the essence of ginger, but the essence of truth."

John scarcely knew what reply to give to this strange piece of egotism, and so he merely gave a nod, conveying an acquiescence or dis-

agreement, or any kind, sort, or form of reply that might be agreeable to the landlord's sentiments.

"Yes, Sir," continued Edward Dixon, folding his arms across his capacious breast, "I've always walked upright, talked upright, laid down upright; that is my opinions; and, as King Solomon says—I think it's King Solomon, Mr. Hardy—He who walks in righteous ways, in an easy chair may end his days! That's my hope, Sir."

John trusted that the hope would be realized.

"Now there's my Nancy," said the landlord, flying off at another tangent, "is a very fair sample of what *may* be done in bringing up an infant in the way it should walk. I did that, Mr. Hardy," continued Edward Dixon, placing unmistakeable stress upon the pronoun. "She was left an unprotected little sucker, at the early age of two days," said he, lowering his voice to a pathetic tone. "Yes, Mr. Hardy,

her mother, and my Sally, left us the Lion to ourselves, with scarcely any notice beforehand ; and from that moment *I* became her nurse. You'll understand," and now he dropped his words into a confidential whisper, for the broiled fowl was audibly on its way up stairs, "I don't mean that I was the wet-nurse ; that motherly duty, Sir, was performed by Susan Colly, our blacksmith's wife ; but barring this, Nancy, as you now see her, is the result of her father's training."

"I'm sure," responded John, "that she confers upon you very great credit."

And now the broiled fowl made its appearance, carried by Dick, the attendant upon Blossom, acting in the double capacity of ostler and waiter, on a large tray, surrounded by countless accompaniments, and followed by Nancy, with her hands full of the assistants to the creature comforts.

After inquiring after the state and condition of Blossom, and learning that the squabby cob

was as happy as good oats, hay, straw, and a warm stable could render him—more he never required—John drew his chair to the well-filled, well-appointed table, and commenced, to the infinite gratification of Edward Dixon, an onslaught upon the dainties spread before him.

May good digestion wait on appetite, excellent, glorious John Hardy! for ye count not on the coming, ay, and near, too, adventures of this night. Erst thy snore becomes loud enough to summon Jack o' Dreams to play frolics in thy brain, well may'st thou say—

“Sleep, gentle sleep,
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,
That thou no more will weigh my eyelids down,
And steep my senses in forgetfulness?”

CHAPTER X.

“Enjoy the honey-heavy dew of slumber :
Thou hast no figures, nor no fantasies,
Which busy care draws in the brains of men ;
Therefore thou sleep’st so sound.”

THE past, present, and to come ; age of youth and youth of age, health of sickness and sickness of health ; of strength, when tottering weakness unstrings the well-girt thews and sinews of manly vigour, and of helpless, weak, and sinking debility ; when the blood leaps through the veins, and in every intricacy of the frame not a throb of the pulse indicates a nerve to be disordered—such is the stuff that dreams are made of !

Ay, the old, when wrapped in slumber deep,

are led back to scenes fresh and fanciful, which, in their wakeful moments, would appear but shades of faint imageries and things all but bleared from their memory. 'Tis then that the games of careless boyhood are played again; the cricket ball is whizzed by the well-directed bat across the village green, and the shout and whoop! ring and echo as in the days of yore. Meadows daisy-pied, and green lanes, flanked with blooming May-flowers, wild and beautiful, are trod and wandered through again, and the heart's first chosen one, with all the flush of generous early days, is once more a companion loving and beloved, in those heaven-blessed wanderings, never to be effaced from the recollection.

And then manhood's ambitious struggle for fame and fortune! The days, the nights, the months, the years of toil! The hour—the *moment* that is to crown the victor, or to crush the vanquished—all pass like the quick successive changes in the kaleidoscope through the

prism of the mind ; and at the first crow of the wakeful cock, or the buzzing of an idle fly, the sleeper wakes—a depressed, old, and friendless man. Such is the stuff that dreams are made of!

Perhaps he had slept long, and yet it seemed that his eyelids had scarcely been closed for a few short moments, when John Hardy—a tenant in full occupation and possession of the best bed of which the Lion could boast, and after being “tucked up” and inspected as he reclined and was wedged between a double row of the soft feathers of the bird in lineal descent to that gaining the capitol of ancient Rome, by Edward Dixon, and being pronounced by that bigoted individual, “as comfortable as a buttered muffin”—awoke. The act of waking was not one of those yawning, gaping, stretching, reluctant separations from the tender and soothing embraces of Somnus: not a lingering resignation to obliviousness of the world without at this moment, and a heavy-

eyed, winking, blinking, uncertain consciousness, the next and succeeding one. Quick, sudden and abrupt, John Hardy found himself as wide awake as ever he was in his existence, which, metaphorically speaking, was not nearly up to the mark in the estimation of Mike Crouch, Peter Parkins, and such like worthies, that the world and its ways deem it expedient for the vision of mortals to be.

There, wrapped in his holland, John sat bolt upright in the bed, with a hand grasping the tassel of his nightcap, in the act to draw and hurl it from his head ; but still a laudable hesitation to be rash, withheld the deed.

The rushlight, placed, for security, in the washing basin, at the farthest corner from the bed, and in which were a few teaspoonfuls of water, as an additional protection against the fiery element, and yet such was the pale, consumptive, flickering flame, that it appeared scarcely capable of keeping itself in, much less of igniting anything besides—threw an uncer-

tain, indistinct light around and about, and made John's substantial and material body, visible above the bed-clothes, look somewhat misty, and of the ghostly order.

There could be no doubt about it, no doubt whatever; although John dived the end of his little finger into his left ear, and extracted the piece of wool therein ensconced, that he might hear the better, as, forty years ago, he caught a cold in the organ, and ever since that time it had been his wont to apply this as a guardian and protective;—there could be no doubt, whatever, it must be repeated, that the cause of John Hardy's disturbance, from slumber sweet and profound, was the conglomeration of many words from several mouths, hallooed from a diversity of tongues, in all the keys that a lover of discord could desire.

“Charles, de-a-r Charles,” sobbed a woman's voice on the other side of the wainscot, supposed to be intended as a division between the two rooms; but even Edward Dixon had strong

misgivings as to the feasibility of the hypothesis, and has been known to strain his sight between the many cracks in the panels, and to thump his knuckles sharply on one side, and to run quickly round, in order to catch the sound on the opposite.

"Faithless woman!" ejaculated a voice, in a melodramatic tone. "Faithless wom—"

"I pledge you my honour—" interrupted a third speaker.

"I pledge you my honour, Sir," repeated the interpleader, "that you are lying—"

"Lying?" thundered the melodramatic voice.

"Under a mistake," concluded the intercessor, in an oily, winning, slippery, eel-like, wriggling tone; and then there were certain p—pu—puffs, leading the listener to suppose the sentence might have been followed by clouds issuing from the burning and narcotic weed, "tobacco," from lips engaged in clasping a plebeian yard of clay, a luxurious hookah, or the more fashionable taper tip of a cigar.

"My h—us—ba—nd!" exclaimed the female, from behind something of the choking order—perhaps a handkerchief.

"I can't—I can't—I *cannot* stand it!" rejoined—from the solemnity of the delivery, John Hardy concluded that it was the husband who declared his inability of maintaining an erect position.

"Pardon me," returned the third speaker; for there were evidently but three speakers engaged in the discussion, "you had much better sit down and be comfortable."

"Sit down and be comfortable!" repeated the husbandlike-tongue, between a shriek and a roar. "Is not this my wedding-day? Has not my Amelia—my wife, eloped with a viper who I thought my friend?—Sit down and be comfortable! Preposterous supposition!"

"All quite true, certainly," added the speaker, who seemed to be occupied between smoking, talking, and listening, and which respective indulgencies it appeared that he was

reducing to the focus of one enjoyment ; “ but then, taking all the circumstances into consideration, you will find it much more satisfactory,” continued he, “ to wave the ideal, and come to facts.”

“ Yes, yes,” returned the womanly accents, “ come to facts, in the name of Heaven !”

“ Have I not come to facts ?” asked the apparently injured stranger. “ Did I not arrive here and find both of ye at the Lion, this roadside inn ? And are not these facts—strong, palpable, undeniable facts ?”

“ To be sure they are,” replied the interlocutor, in a cool, unruffled tone, at direct variance with the accuser’s. “ But what of that ? The very admission renders the arrangement so much the more easy. When a circumstance is reduced to a positive conclusion, there’s an end to all quibbling, prevaricating, questioning, doubting, and all that sort of thing. Now, here we are, and we must bear the brunt of the accident, Sniphey.”

"*Accident!*" ejaculated the person evidently addressed as Sniphey. "Do you call running away with a man's wife, on the day he was married, an *accident*, Tobias?" continued he, in a superlatively indignant tone.

"Pure and unadulterated, I stake you my reputation," responded Tobias.

A laugh followed; but conveying no association of mirth. It was one of those hollow, empty haw-haws, which may be supposed to emanate from the fiend when stirring up the furnace of fallen spirits.

"Oh Char—ar—r—r—les!" exclaimed the female voice. It was your fau—au—lt. You did it!"

"Yes, Mr. Sniphey," added Tobias, and his voice became many degrees firmer and more authoritative, "you did it, and I am sorry for ye."

"I!" screeched Sniphey—"I did it?"

"Yes, sir," returned the representative of the softer sex, changing her tone and manner

from the supplicating to—coarse may be the term, but there is no other so graphical—the “bullying.” “Yes, Sir,” repeated she, and approaching her beginning-to-be-cowed husband, until it appeared to John Hardy that her nose was within touch and miss of his. “It was your shameful, unhandsome, unmanly, despicable shocking neglect of *me*, your bride, Sir, that led to the teaching you this lesson; and, if any repugnance of conscience be felt for your unheard of cru—cru—elty”—the passionate outburst of grief which followed, completely swamped and swallowed up the completion of the sentence.

“Sniphey!” said Tobias whoever-it-might-be, “I can make allowances for a man’s wounded vanity at finding his wife bolting (bolting is a sporting phrase) immediately, or within an hour or two of the religious ceremony which assigns him the right and title of so calling her. I say,” continued Tobias, seriously, “that I can make the allowances of a Christian in such

a matter ; but, when the cause may be directly traced to his own wilful negligence and ——”

“ Wilful negligence !” interrupted Sniphey.

“ Most unquestionably,” rejoined Tobias.

“ What did you, let me ask, after plighting your troth at the altar ?”

“ Eat my breakfast,” replied the humbled Sniphey, as if the admission came involuntarily.

“ But after that, Sir, after that,” rejoined his wedded but unbedded half ; and she brought the flat palms of her hands sharply together, by way of a finish.

“ My dear Amelia,” pleaded the now beaten Sniphey, “ I acknowledge that I was wrong ; but still two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“ Yes they do, Mr. Sniphey,” returned Tobias, “ yes they do, Sir, and I’ll *prove* it. If you wrong the law, what is the consequence ? The law, very likely (most immensely so) takes your money out of your pocket to the wrong of your creditors, wife, and children, poor rela-

tions and connexions; and yet people generally, or, as they are called, *the world*, will say that it served you *right*. Can anything be plainer?"

Sniphey seemed, from his silence, dumb-founded:

"If you'll ask for my forgiveness in suitable terms and manner," said Amelia, "I may be induced to grant it."

"Has it come to this!" exclaimed Sniphey, again, what may be called, "boiling up," and at the same time, there was a sudden slap, as if a fly or a gnat had been crushed upon the bald part of his brow.

"To be sure it has," replied Tobias, "and very properly so. Down on your knees, Sniphey."

There was a pause in the proceedings—a long, doubtful, lingering pause, big with the fate of Sniphey.

"No," at length ejaculated that individual; and, as it came from his lips, it sounded not unlike a cough.

"Very good," responded Tobias. "Am I, then, to understand by this intrusion upon my privacy that you require anything more of me, now that I have yielded undisturbed possession of your wife? If so, speak; if not, be off, Sniphey; for I would enjoy the next whiff of the weed in comfort, and that must, of necessity, be in your absence, Sniphey."

Upon the heels of this reply there was an indistinct murmur, and John Hardy fancied that the sound bore a close affinity to "satisfaction."

There was a half-smothered scream; it might have been more effectual if the handkerchief had been closely pressed across the lips, more particularly at one corner.

"Oh, certainly, to be sure!" observed Tobias; "all men have a right to be satisfied, and a representative of the Snipheys has as good right to the demand as any other. "By the way," continued the speaker, "here's a brace of pistols;" and scarcely had he spoken, when the

sear clicking in the tumbler gave evidence that he was trying the strength of the triggers.

Now, John Hardy felt as conscious as if his eyes had not been obstructed by the thin and dilapidated panel professing to divide his dormitory from the apartment in which this examination was taking place, that these pistols were his own; and the reflection was also mingled with the knowledge that they were loaded—loaded with real powder and bullets. The very idea occasioned John's teeth to chatter, and a tremor vibrated through his frame like aspen leaves in a bustling wind.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed that little worthy man, while the scanty white hairs beneath his nightcap became stiff with horror at the contemplation of a deed of blood. "Goodness gracious!" repeated he, and he clutched the bedclothes in a sort of convulsion," the man is surely not rash enough to touch my pistols!"

"Sniphey," said a voice, while the sharp clicking of a deadly weapon announced the fact

of its being prepared for service, "take your choice of these playthings."

"Playthings!" repeated John Hardy, turning his eyes to the chintz canopy above his head.

"Take a respectful farewell of your wife, Sniphey," continued the speaker, in a cool, determined manner; "place yourself in yonder corner of the room, and I'll send you to another and to a better world in a canter."

"No, no, no," hurriedly ejaculated the womanly voice; "Charles, my hus-hus-band, don't be fool-hardy!"

"Very proper advice, certainly," rejoined Tobias, "and worthy of regard; but when honour calls, cowards only should be deaf. Eh, Sniphey?"

There was a dull, gloomy, dogged silence, which was unbroken for the longest half-minute that ever drew its weary length along the life of John Hardy. To him it seemed as if Time had forgotten to press on, and was making a pause in his flight.

I'm resolved!" at length cried a voice, which the listener at once recognised as belonging to Sniphey, "and I'LL BE SHOT—"

John waited to hear no more; had he done so, the completion of the sentence—"if I don't call the constable," might have made a strange difference in his proceedings. As it was, however, he threw aside the coverings of his bed, sprung upon the floor, and, forgetful of his all but primitive state, rushed to the folding doors which opened into the sitting-room, where he had regaled himself with the broiled fowl and mushroom sauce, and threw them back abruptly, almost violently, upon their hinges.

A scream, loud, shrill, and piercing, burst from the tongue of a female form, as John's rotundity of figure made itself clear, defined, and palpable within.

"I beg your pardon," commenced John, bowing politely to the three strangers before him, one of whom was a tall, thin, spare-rib of a woman, with a long vinegar countenance;

another a short, fat, tubby man, with light flaxen hair and a pink skin under it, and a face as round, smooth, and pale as a white wafer; and the third, a tall, powerfully-built man, of dark complexion, with a profusion of strong black hair curling crisply in one bunch over his head. "I beg your pardon," repeated John, taking a modest glance at each of the three composing his audience; "but I hope the cause will justify my intrusion—I heard, accidentally, I assure ye, words of quarrel—high, threatening language."

From the summit of John Hardy's cerebrum to the ends of his stockingless and unslipped feet, he was subjected to the inspection, by a slow and measured gaze, of the respective members forming the group.

All seemed speechless from astonishment. At length the pause was broken by the vinegar-faced, spare-rib of a woman, throwing herself upon the neck of the tubby man with flaxen hair, and shrieking, as she hid her ill-favoured

countenance in his bosom. "It is a man, Charles, my husband; it's a man without his breeches!"

"Hush, my love, hush!" returned the little man, patting the back of his love as if she was suffering from the sensation of choking. "Compose yourself, my Amelia; compose yourself."

"Lead me from the room," added she in a hoarse whisper, "or I shall faint."

Doing her bidding, the compliant husband assisted her out of the room, and the door closed upon the couple.

"I trust," said John, addressing the dark stranger remaining, and who stood staring at the extraordinary figure presented to his view in mute wonder, "I trust," repeated he, "that I have not driven the lady away?"

"Driven the lady away!" repeated the stranger. "Would you have her remain in the presence of a man without his—"

The speaker pointed significantly to John's exposed shins.

"Oh dear me!" ejaculated John, looking at his legs, "you refer to my breeches, or, more properly, to a want of them. I really beg a thousand pardons; but in my haste to prevent the shedding of blood, I quite overlooked that circumstance."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the stranger, "ha, ha, ha;" and he laughed both long and loudly, and until the tears poured down his cheeks. "But I forgot," said he, getting a check upon his mirth, "you're unacquainted with Sniphey, or you would never have been so hastily disturbed from your bed with such a fear."

"Was it all sham, then?" innocently inquired John.

"By no means," answered the stranger. "However, go and put on your breeches, before I answer any more questions."

"Perhaps," rejoined John, doubtfully, "I ought no longer to intrude, as there seems to be not any likelihood of murder or manslaughter."

"You may be wanted, notwithstanding," returned the stranger, "and as you have volunteered your services, I shall require their performance. Get your breeches."

Ever ready to be of service, if that service was to confer a benefit, John retired for a few seconds, and re-appeared with his legs encased in the desired articles, and wrapped up in one of his great-coats.

"Come," said the stranger, pushing a chair opposite his own, by the fire burning briskly in the grate, "you now look more like a——" he was about to add "man," but upon closer examination of John's form, he substituted "mummy."

John thought this remarkably facetious, and broke into a loud fit of laughter.

"That's a hearty sound, Sir!" said the stranger, admiringly, "a jolly, good, wholesome, healthy laugh. I love to hear a man laugh in that style. Let me mix ye a glass of brandy and water."

John began to plead a number of polite excuses, and stated, over and over again, that he never drank more than a certain quantity of a night, and that had already been deposited within.

The stranger took not the slightest notice of John Hardy's excuses, couched in the plainest English that was ever delivered, any more than if they had been made in Japanese, Chinese, or some unknown tongue spoken ten thousand years ago, and of which there is neither record nor syllable left to tell what it was. He filled a capacious goblet to the brim with as dark mahogany-coloured a mixture as eyes ever beheld in the shape of brandy and water.

"There," said he, proffering the glass, "sip that. You must be chilly from a warm bed."

Well! John sipped; and, as he did so, he, like anybody else, could not refrain from making a slight cursory examination of his com-

panion. As before has been stated, he was a tall and strong-limbed man, with a dark olive complexion, and a luxuriant head of jet-black curls. There was a peculiarity about the expression of his eyes and mouth—a sly, cunning look about the former, while the latter seemed pursed with satirical humour—which no close observer could mistake as the characteristics of the affections within,

“Your health, Sir,” said he, raising his glass, “and let me hope this nocturnal disturbance will not prove prejudicial to it.”

John thanked him politely and warmly for this friendly wish, and pledged his own sentiment—which was quite as benevolent—more deeply, and that was to the last drop in his glass.

Things progress strangely fast, sometimes, when brandy and water acts as a stimulant, and, perhaps, never did they proceed at a greater pace than on the present occasion.

The stranger smoked a little, short, Dutch

pipe, with a disproportionably large bowl, and at short intervals, occupied in keeping the tobacco burning, began to inform John Hardy of the cause of the extraordinary scene which, if he had not exactly witnessed, he was fully acquainted with by the sense of hearing.

“ The whole affair lies in a nut-shell,” said the stranger, carelessly running his fingers through his bushy locks. “ My name is Tobias Smith, Sir—the family of the Smiths, as you may be aware, are well known throughout the civilized world—that of the biped in whose safety your best feelings of humanity were awakened, Charles Leo Sniphey. About a month since, we became acquainted, in consequence of my turning the corner of a street sharply, in Exeter, and knocking him down backwards, to the injury of the behind part of his person generally; and from that moment we became, what I may call, bosom friends. The principal secret that I had to communicate, was the one that all my acquaintances

discover, sooner or later—an unfortunate want of money; and, in order to evince my confidence in Sniphey, I told him, without reserve, the state of my finances, and within an hour of our introduction, borrowed twenty pounds of him. Well, Sir,” continued the stranger, after sending a thick volume of smoke curling upwards to the ceiling, “in acknowledgment of this trust, Sniphey informed me of the whole particulars of his birth, parentage, education, hopes, disappointments, and joys—with which details I shall not trouble you—and, among the rest of his affairs, informed me that he was about to be married to the widow of his departed master, an opulent auctioneer.”

John felt rather dozy at this stage of the proceedings, and his head began to sway to and fro. But, shaking off the dull effects of sleep, he, smilingly, expressed a hope that his companion would proceed.

“The tale is nearly ended,” resumed the

stranger, commencing to mingle the ingredients for a fresh glass. "I was very frequently with Sniphey at his lodgings after this, especially at the times of dinner and supper; and, at the end of a week from the time of knocking him backwards, we were inseparable. He introduced me to his intended, the acid-featured, bony woman, whom your want of breeches conferred the benefit of getting rid of before any reasonable expectation of so doing presented itself, and the little attentions that I paid the remains of antiquity, led her quickly to imagine that I was a captive to her scraggy charms. I like a joke immensely, and rather fanned this flame of conceit than threw any damper upon it; and the consequence was, that, by the time the wedding-day arrived—which was this extremely cold one—the old lady, instead of being desirous of becoming the better half of Charles Leo Sniphey, was far more ambitious of my claiming her as the more valuable portion of Tobias Smith. Now,

although I am free to confess, that I should have liked her money, yet I need not say to you, Sir—a man of taste, I am sure—that a few hundreds were insufficient to gild so repugnant a pill; I therefore fought shy, and Sniphey conducted his betrothed, this morning, to the altar. The ceremony—did you ever hear the ceremony?” inquired the narrator, flying off at a tangent.

John replied, that he never had had the pleasure.

“It’s a dull, matter-of-fact sort of proceeding,” rejoined the stranger, “and far from contributing to cheer one’s spirits early in the day. However, the ceremony over, we, that is, Mr. and Mrs. Sniphey, and the bridesmaid—an old char-woman, hired expressly for the occasion, for Mrs. Sniphey does not appear to have a friend of any kind or description in this wide world—sat down to breakfast at the Old London Inn; and, if you had seen the meal that that Sniphey swallowed, Sir, you

never would have forgotten it. Rump-steaks, smothered with onions, sausages, tripe, boiled and fried, slices of fat ham, eggs, hot rolls, and rounds of buttered toast, disappeared down that pasty, poultice-faced individual's throat in such quantities, that, where store-room could be found is, and will be, a matter of speculation with me for the remainder of my existence. After visible effects of repletion, the gorged bridegroom quaffed a pint of Dublin stout, and two glasses of brandy; and, throwing himself at full stretch upon the sofa in the room, gave himself up to the enjoyment of a deep, thick, snoring sleep.

"And now, Sir," continued the speaker, "I must, having arrived at nearly a termination of my condensed narrative, make a short break in the links of the chain of events, and give you to understand the causes by which my subsequent conduct were actuated. It has been the absorbing object of my life to create a *stir*—by some it is called a sensation—when-

ever and wherever I could. As flies love sugar, children toys, women dress, clergymen their tithes, aldermen turtle soup, soldiers war, doctors disease, and lawyers quarrels, so *I* delight in *stirs*. Give me a *stir*, and I am happy ; without it, I am wretched. The poet says, ‘ what is life without its pleasures ?’ I, Tobias Smith, say—what is life without its *stirs* ? Read, write, make love, fight, anything for a *stir*. These are my sentiments.”

John remarked, that they were singular ; but there was no accounting for taste.

“ Accounting for taste !” repeated the stranger, elevating his voice the more at every consecutive syllable. “ No, my dear Sir ; look at that Sniphey, and then say no more of taste. Well, when Sniphey had so far forgotten his wife and himself, as to snore most discordantly, I, in the winning manner of an eternal slave, began to make love to the bride ; and it took something less than a quarter of an hour to prevail upon the old lady to order and—I

may add, by way of parenthesis—pay for a single horse-fly, to creep—not *run*, mark you—away with me to this inn, just for the purpose of creating a *stir*. We were a long time on the road, having to get out and walk up the hills, from the weakness of the animal; but at length here we arrived, as you, I suppose, had given up possession of this room; for there were the battered remains of a fowl on a dish when we entered it, and other odds and ends, which might lead one to suppose that a gentleman had just finished his supper. A couple of hours afterwards, the bewildered Sniphey, having learned the route we had taken, followed us on the box-seat of the night-coach, which stops here to change horses about twelve o'clock; and that which followed you are, doubtlessly, aware of.”

“The coincidence is very remarkable,” observed John Hardy.

“Got up just for a *stir*, Sir, I assure ye,” replied the stranger; “and if you had not come

in when you did, I should have blazed off *that* pistol," continued he, "and stirred up Sniphey's fears pretty considerably, and everybody in the Lion who may be now asleep."

"I suppose," said John, giving himself a shake, as if under the chilling influence of the dying cinders in the grate, "that the gentleman will not return to renew the quarrel?"

"You need be under no apprehension on that score," replied Tobias Smith; "for I shall take my leave immediately, and leave Sniphey to settle the account. Have another glass of brandy and water?"

John declined, and rose to take his leave.

"You're going," said the stranger, noticing the movement. "Well! I cannot hope that you will stay any longer from bed, and you need be under no farther apprehension from a *stir* on my account."

John hoped not, and, although he hesitated to shake hands with such a doubtful character as his companion undoubtedly was, yet,

after a short pause, he gave him a friendly grasp, and turned upon his heel to take his departure.

"God bless you!" said the stranger. "By the way," continued he, as John Hardy was just becoming lost to sight within his dormitory, "can you direct me to a place called the Range, a few miles from here?"

"The Range!" repeated John, standing still, and looking like a man astonished beyond expression.

"That's the name of the spot," replied Tobias Smith, "that I shall start for at once, although it's yet too early for the light."

John Hardy had a very powerful inclination to inquire about the pleasure or business that Tobias Smith might have at the Range; but he mastered the desire to put the question.

"I know the Range very well," observed he; "it belongs to an old friend of mine."

"The devil it does!" ejaculated the stranger. "Indeed. Humph! Then you may know

something of the *stir* that I caused there some years ago, and which, I have been given to understand, has never been allowed to settle down again."

It was very natural that John should inquire what this was, having prefaced the query by declaring that he did not, and, in a homely phrase, without beating about the bush, he asked for the particulars of this event.

"Did you never hear of a fine, fat, living baby being sent——"

John Hardy sprung from the floor as if it had suddenly heaved him into the air, and, rushing towards the no less surprised Tobias Smith, clutched him by both hands, and, by main force dragged him into a chair.

"Young man," said he, in a scarcely articulate voice, "you've touched a chord"—and John thumped himself significantly on the bosom.

An hour passed, and then another, and when even Dick the ostler, the earliest riser of the

inmates of the Lion, hastened to give Blossom his matin feed, John Hardy remained drinking, with ready ear, the tale, both strange and true, that Tobias Smith recounted to him.

CHAPTER XI.

An envious sneaping frost,
That bites the first-born infants of the spring.

"I NEVER could, and never shall, I expect," soliloquized Job Sykes, looking at the ceiling, but not exactly referring to it, "be able to find out what frosts are sent for!"

Mrs. Sykes was in the act of dropping into a tea-cup about as much sugar as could be conveniently placed on the point of a pen-knife without squeezing; but upon hearing this observation from Job, she deliberately replaced this minimum quantity in the basin from which she had extracted it, and, raising her hands, gave vent to the short exclamation of, "Well, I never!"

"What's the matter now?" said Job.

"Matter!" returned Mrs. Sykes. "If you were a heathen that didn't eat pork, or a Jew, or a cannibal, one mightn't be surprised at such wicked observations about the frost; but for a man who can read his Bible."—Mrs. Sykes gravely shook her head.—"Be thankful if your tea or toast don't choke ye this evening."

"I meant no harm, my dear," added Job. "As you know, a frost shuts up hunting, gives chilblains to children, pinches the old and poor, and I can't see any good it does whatever. That's all I meant to say, my dear."

"And isn't that enough, and more than enough?" added Mrs. Sykes. "As a husband—the father of a family——"

"Of Jem, my dear," ventured Job, correcting, as he considered, the mistake of his better half.

"And what is James *but* a family?" returned Mrs. Sykes. "Is he not my son—what

is a son but a child, and what is a child but the *one* of children, and what are children but a family?"

Job now winked at the ceiling, and an audible "the old un's at it again," escaped his lips.

"I begin," said Mrs. Sykes, making a second dive at the sugar, "to pity your ignorance as well as your laxity of morals!"

"I forgot to say," remarked Job, making a desperate effort to change the subject, "that Master Tom will be here this evening. I shouldn't be surprised," continued he, glancing at the old clock in the corner, tick-tacking in the extreme feebleness of age, "if he comes in about five minutes from this time."

"Then why didn't you say so before?" replied Mrs. Sykes. "You know I can't abide being taken unawares, particularly if my cap's not quite in trim. You seem to me, Job," continued she, "to grow more thoughtless,

and worse in all points of view, every day you live."

"It's of no consequence," pleaded the re-proved Job. "He'll not stay a minute, as we're going to try to bag a badger to-night."

"But he may not wish to start immediately," rejoined Mrs. Sykes; "and I hope he won't, as a more agreeable young gentleman to talk to a body, doesn't live in these parts."

"You never spoke a truer word, Betty," returned Job, blowing a cup of hot tea, "never in your life. He's what I call thoroughbred, unblemished, and sound, and worthy of being, as he is, first favourite with everybody, from the Squire down to Mike Crouch."

"You've gone low enough *now*," added Mrs. Sykes. "Mike Crouch should never have been taken into the Squire's service; it allows the vagabond to give himself a consequence he's no right to."

"He's the best earth-stopper in all Warwickshire," remarked Job.

A pretty recommendation truly," returned Mrs. Sykes, with offended dignity portrayed in every move and gesture: "and the one, I've no doubt, to which he owes his right of claiming servitude under the Squire.

"I certainly did—"

"Of course you *did*," interrupted Mrs. Sykes, anticipating the sequel to her husband's sentence: "you always *do* those things which you ought not to do, and leave undone a multitude of things which a sensible man would scorn to forget or neglect. I begin to feel"—and Mrs. Sykes closed her eyes, and looked like a woman suffering under a load of mental trouble—"that my lessons to you, Job, is very like throwing sound apples to swine—a wanton waste."

"Perhaps it is, Betty," replied Job; and, giving a sly wink at the ceiling, added, "perhaps it would be as well not to throw any more."

"I know my duty, Mr. Sykes," rejoined the loquacious and pedantic dame, "without any

assistance on your part. If I choose to resign myself, Sir, to the loss of my words, the greater reason for you to profit by my meekness."

At this juncture, and much to the huntsman's satisfaction, approaching footsteps were heard without, and immediately afterwards, his son James opened the door of the apartment, and, holding it open, said, "Mother, here's Master Tom come to see ye."

"Good evening, Mrs. Sykes," said Master Tom, entering the room, and offering his hand to the delighted old lady; "I hope this cold weather has not produced any return of the rheumatism."

Mrs. Sykes thanked heaven and some new flannel garments, that it had not.

"I'm no later than I said I would be, Job," observed Master Tom, turning to the huntsman.

"No, Sir," replied Job; "it's just about the time: but we must start soon, as the moon will sink early."

"Mike is at the door with the dogs, rejoined Master Tom, "and I am ready when you are."

"What kind of a team is it, Sir?" inquired the huntsman.

"There's his brindled bull-terrier, the white Scotch one of mine, and a dog called Toby, that he borrowed of some friend," replied Master Tom.

"Why, that last one is the razor-grinder's, I expect," rejoined Job.

"Yes, it is," responded James; "and a bigger varmint never lived: he's ready to worry anything from a mouse to a horse."

During this short discussion, Mrs. Sykes had been rummaging about the shelves of the cupboard with a glass door, and bringing forth a stout bottle, proceeded to fill bumpers round, with a grateful fluid, commonly called "cherry-bounce."

"There, Sir; take that," said Mrs. Sykes, proffering Tom a glass: "it's my own, and

from experience, I know it will keep the cold out."

Tom thanked the dame, and said that he did not question her experience in such a matter for a moment; but still he would put it to the test, and had the pleasure of drinking her health, long life, and captivating looks to the end of her days.

Tom, Master Tom! you touched the most vulnerable corner in the most sensitive part of Mrs. Sykes's affections, and *you knew it*. Yes; that good dame had still the smouldering embers of vanity within, which required but little of the breath of praise to fan into a flame; and with his accustomed habit—for Master Tom had a soft word, and still softer looks for both young and old of the weaker sex—he lost not the opportunity of sending her blood tingling to her cheek, and her pulse to beat fast and uncertain, as in those days when Job used to dwell so rapturously upon her charms.

"Really, Sir," said Mrs. Sykes, simpering and blushing, "you make one feel like a Michaelmas flea all in a twitter."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Job, slapping the mahogany-coloured top of his boot, crossed over his knee. "Ha, ha, ha! The old woman, Sir," continued he, appealing to Master Tom, "talks just as she did when young, and as ripe as a cherry. I remember that very speech thirty years ago, when I was giving her a little of the tongue's dally-dally."

It would have been as well for the huntsman's subsequent peace of mind, if he had not made this allusion to the past, as Mrs. Sykes became suddenly calm, just like one of those lulls before a gale, with the resolve and fixed determination of making him regret that he had thus given licence to his speech.

"Now, Job," said Master Tom, finishing the cherry-bounce, "let us start; for I ventured four crowns with the Squire, that we would get him a skin for a cap to keep his ears

warm in the fen, and it would mortify me to lose the wager."

"I'm at your service, Sir," replied the huntsman, rising from his seat. "But where is Jem?—isn't he going?"

"Yes, father," returned Jem, from without: "here I am, quite ready, and so will Mike be when he's finished the stoup."

"I can't, Mr. James, I can't, indeed!" said the well-known voice of Mike Crouch, as if considerably stifled from want of breath.

"Nonsense, man!" replied the whipper-in, heartily: "what are a couple of quarts of mild ale to you?—Down with every drop."

Job buttoned his coat to his throat; Master Tom took a flattering leave of Mrs. Sykes—and such an one, that the old lady became all smiles again; and, as he made her a low and cremonious bow upon leaving the room, she thought him the handsomest youth she had ever seen in a black velvet shooting-jacket, gaiters, and breeches.

"We're under your guidance, directions, and orders, recollect, Mike," said Master Tom, upon gaining the outside of the cottage, "and so lead away."

"Very good, Sir," replied the earth-stopper, swinging three or four sacks over his left shoulder, and trudging forwards, followed by the three terrible rough and ragged animals christened Trip, Trouncer, and Toby. The last-named animal has been heard of before.

"Where shall ye point for first?" inquired Job.

"To the Devil's Spring," replied Mike. "We shall be sure to find a badger's run there; and if not earthed, we'll soon have him."

"There's very little chance of his being at ground, I think, at this hour," remarked the whipper-in.

"It's a little too early," returned Mike. "However, by the time we get there, I'm in hopes to find him a-foot."

Up long lanes, and through meadows, and over hedge and ditch, gate and stile; through gaps and yielding fence; and now over the hill-top on which the night-wind swept so keen and sharp, that tears floated in the eyes of the wayfarers not used to its rough, burly kiss; and then, deep in the valley, and skirting the copse, and across the common on which the furze and dwarf blackberry-bush flourished, Mike led the party, bent upon the capture of the digger of the fox's earth—the tough-skinned, strong-jawed badger.

Now they entered a thick wood, studded with dark-green fir-trees, and over which towering elms and beech-trees stretched their giant limbs; and from the lofty boughs of many, the gaily-plumed pheasant craned his long neck, and, peering at his nocturnal disturbers, shook his bright feathers, after they had passed, and settled himself again to rest. The wary wood-pigeon, too, gave notice of the coming of the intruders, and broke the still,

soundless haunt of many a sleeping denizen of the wild, by flapping her broad wing from her perch, and whirr-r-ing to some distant scene.

"Hist," said the huntsman in a whisper, "I thought I heard the bark of a fox."

"You thought right enough," replied Mike, in the same suppressed accent; "there, d'ye hear the varmint now?"

As he spoke, the sound was too clear and distinct to be mistaken, and reynard was doubtlessly making a rabbit's heart tremble, as he heard his enemy making, to him, night hideous.

"It's beautiful to one's feelings," rejoined Job; "quite beautiful to hear a fox. For my own part," continued he, "I think there's more music in his bark than in the song of a nightingale."

Threading through the narrow path leading through the covert, they at length gained the outskirts, flanked by deep furze brakes,

and in which there was a sand-pit, abandoned to the free use and occupation of numerous progenies of conies; and a high mound, or bank of earth, forming a natural barrier to more than two-thirds of this waste, afforded retreats for the fox and the badger.

"I stopped most of the earths last night," observed Mike, "and so we have but to peg our bags down at the few open ones."

"You know where to drop upon them, I suppose?" returned Master Tom.

"Yes, Sir, yes," rejoined Mike; "I could find them with my eyes shut;" and, as he spoke, he stooped down, and began fixing a long bag or sack at the mouth of a cavity in the bank, scooped under the entangled roots of some trees hard by.

"There," continued the earthstopper, addressing Master Tom, and finishing the arrangement of the trap, "you see, Sir, there's a running noose at the end of the bag, which I peg down with this forked stick; so, as when

the varmint flashes in, it hugs him close and holds him."

"I understand," replied Tom, eager for the commencement of the sport. "Be as quick as you can, Mike."

In a few minutes Mike had fixed the sacks at each of the open earths he had left, and, placing his companions in such positions that they might guard them, "hey'd" the terriers off.

Right glad of the permission, away they went, through bramble and briar, followed by the earthstopper, who dashed through the prickly impediment, with as much ease as if he had been brushing aside buttercups in merry May.

"Now, Trouncer, now Toby?" hallooed he, "wind him! drag on him!—hoick, hoick there, hoick!"

"D'ye hear that, father?" said the whipper-in, stifling a laugh; "Mike's copying your cheer."

"That mustn't be allowed for the future," replied Job. "Cheering a set of mongrels to a badger, like, or even something like clapping hounds on to a fox, is playing games with ——"

The huntsman was about to add "religion," but checking himself, he concluded by saying, "matters that don't bear mocking."

"Hark!" said Tom, posted at a little distance off, "I heard one of the dogs quest."

"That's it, Trouncer!" hallooed Mike; and his voice rung wide and far at that silent hour, and echoed musically away in the very depths of the woods, as if a hundred voices were joining in the cheer. "Hark, hark to Trouncer!—have at him there!—Yoicks, press him!—to him, there!—Hark! hark!" cheered Mike, with his heart in his voice, as "the find" was announced.

Not with each tongue under each, but any way and any how, the terriers yapped, howled, and barked, as they drove the object of pursuit.

before them; and, if any fear existed in the mind of Mike Crouch, that this might unfortunately be a rabbit, stoat, polecat, weazel, or rat, as he full well knew that his pack would open at anything with life, it was quickly dispelled by hearing something brush past him, and a strong fetid smell at the same time gave evidence that it was a badger.

And now Mike hallooed the dogs on, with all the energy that he was master of, and followed closely in their wake, although the ground was rough and difficult to tread.

Now up to his middle in furze, and then crashing through tall, clinging briars; at one moment held fast by some mass of underwood, and then pitching all but head-foremost to the ground, as he struggled, with vengeance, to escape, straight he flew, heedless of every obstacle; and such was his speed and perseverance, that the space between him and the terriers was far from being wide.

"Look out!" called the earth-stopper to his

companions, as the chase pointed to the earths where the sacks had been placed. "Look out!" repeated he.

Scarcely had he given this instruction to be wary, when Master Tom hallooed at the extreme stretch of his lungs, "Here he is, Mike; make haste."

In a few long strides, the earth-stopper was at his side; but, ere he came, a terrible tug of war had begun.

The badger, it appeared, had gained the earth; but not liking the sack, or being frightened from it by some impolitic, ardent action, on the part of Master Tom, he turned from it just in time to be seized by Trouncer's ready jaws, assisted by his fellows. Throwing himself on his back, and inflating his skin as tightly as a bladder, he defied the tusks of his enemies, and effected fearful ravages with his long sharp claws and teeth.

Howling with pain and rage, the terriers seized the badger, and in turn were seized, un-

til the ground—where they rolled over and over, now up, now down—was freely stained with the scarlet current of their life.

“He’ll kill my dog!” exclaimed Tom, in a troubled voice, and making a blow at the badger with a stick, which, unhappily, fell on Toby’s pericranium. The effect was somewhat stunning; but the courageous Toby refreshed himself with a shake, and went to work again like a Trojan.

“Don’t hit him,” pleaded Mike, enjoying the fight immensely. “It’s a pity to spoil the fun.”

“He’s more than a match for the dogs,” said Job. “Kill him outright.”

“Trouncer is fixed by the throat,” returned James, trying to draw the dog off.

“He’ll be killed!” shouted Tom.

Mike dropped suddenly on his knees, and in a moment rolled the dog and the badger into a sack, and, rising, threw both over his shoulder.

"I tell you the dog will be killed," repeated Tom, taking hold of the sack angrily.

"He is, Sir," coolly returned the earth-stopper, "and so is the badger."

END OF VOL I.

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